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The Rio Kid Western

FEB.

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By ARCHIE JOSCELYN

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By DEAN OWEN

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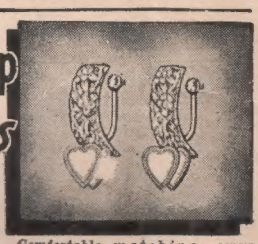

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By
DEAN OWEN

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Quick-Trigger Short Stories

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A FOREMAN MUST BE SMART . . . . . Bayne Hobart 67
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and

THE BUNKHOUSE . . . . . Foghorn Clancy 6
A Department Conducted by America's Foremost Rodeo Expert

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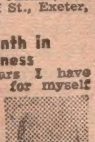

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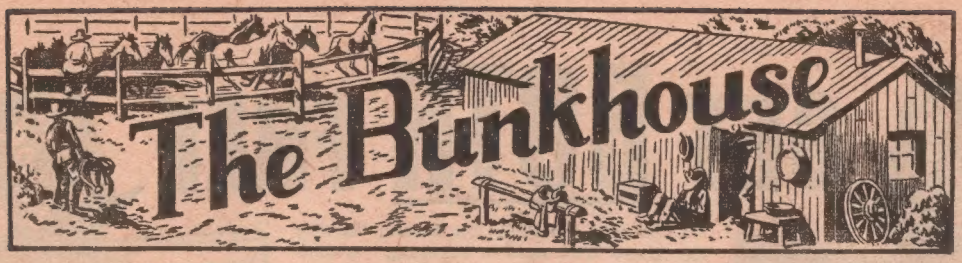


A Department for Readers Conducted by FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HI, WADDIES! While the average city dweller might think that the cattle rustling days are all over, that the cattle rustler vanished years ago, they are mistaken. The cattle thief is still with us, although he is a modernized cattle rustler now, using big trucks and sometimes slaughtering the cattle right on their range and butchering them on the spot, carting away the quartered dressed beef. The high price of beef and the black markets this past year made good business for the cattle rustlers.

The old trail drivers used to take their herds up the Chisholm Trail to the market at Dodge City, Kansas, or westward over the Goodnight-Loving Trail to Colorado and points west, where people would pay what was then considered a good price for beef cattle, but which was a very small price compared to the price of cattle today. On the Texas range in those trail-driving days one could buy a full-grown steer for little more than would be the price of a good family roast in any metropolitan market now!

No More Long Trail Drives

Those trail-driving days are gone forever, there are no more long-trail drives. The method is too slow for this streamlined age. The big trucks for hauls of three hundred miles or less have for a number of years been the main method of transporting cattle, the stock cars and trains for longer distances, and after this war is over there will no doubt be a lot of cattle shipped by air, especially high-priced show cattle.

Some may laugh at this statement, but people have always laughed at advanced ideas, but twenty-two years ago, there was a calf for the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show at Fort Worth, Texas, brought in by plane, and just three years ago Gene Autry shipped his movie horse "Champ" from Hollywood to New York by plane, so the trail driving days are past—and gone on to the last roundup are most of those hardy courageous men known as the trail drivers!

Old Timers Meet

Down at San Antonio, Texas, there is the headquarters of an organization known as The Old Time Trail Drivers, and there each year they meet and have a regular trail drivers' association, where a remnant of the once sizable army of trail drivers talk over the old days, but each year as time goes on there are fewer of the old trail drivers in attendance as each year now the Grim Reaper is cutting into their ranks.

George W. Saunders, himself one of the greatest of the old trail drivers, conceived the idea of forming an association and so in San Antonio, Texas, in February, 1915, The Old Time Trail Drivers' Association was organized with John R. Blocker, President; George W. Saunders, Vice-President; Luther A. Lawhon, Secretary and Colonel R. B. Pumphrey, Treasurer.

Before the next annual meeting a year later six members of the organization had gone up the trail never to return and thus it has been for more than a quarter of a century, fewer meetings each year, until now there is just a mere handful of those old-time characters who braved the dangers of the long dusty cattle trails. But they did not live in vain, they helped to build a great industry, and they left behind them many tales of adventure and heroism.

Real He-Men

The Old Time Trail Drivers' Association was formed for the then-surviving men who had shared the dangers, vicissitudes and hardships of the trail, but there were many who had not survived, many who lost their lives along those hoof-worn paths. Men who knew the dangers and yet risked their lives, some of them for as low a wage as thirty dollars per month, but they were adventurers, they loved adventure and they cared not for the dangers. They were a class unto themselves, a class that we like to refer to as real he-men.

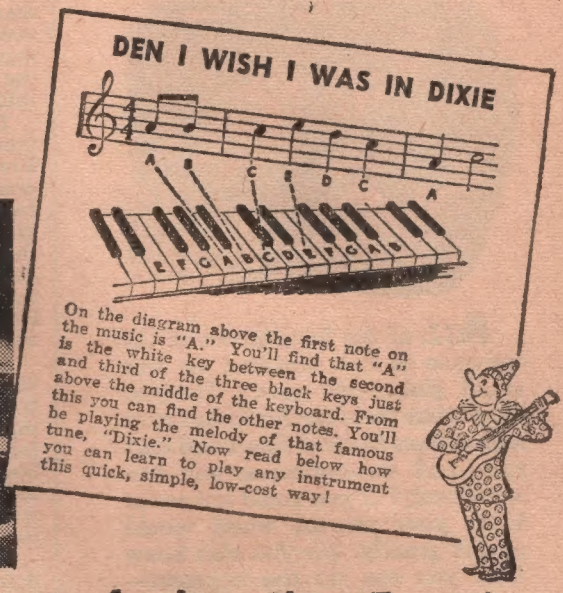
George W. Saunders, the founder of the organization, would have been ninety years old now had he lived. He died eleven years ago at the age of seventy-nine after a full life in which he had made a great and respected name as a cattleman, a trail driver and citizen.

His was a colorful career. Many times he faced death, always without flinching. He could face danger without allowing it to make him panicky, with a clear mind, capable of

(Continued on page 8)

LOOKS EASY.... AND IT IS EASY!

—yet, it's from that famous favorite of the South, "Dixie"



On the diagram above the first note on the music is "A." You'll find that "A" is the white key between the second and third of the three black keys just above the middle of the keyboard. From this you can find the other notes. You'll be playing the melody of that famous tune, "Dixie." Now read below how you can learn to play any instrument this quick, simple, low-cost way!

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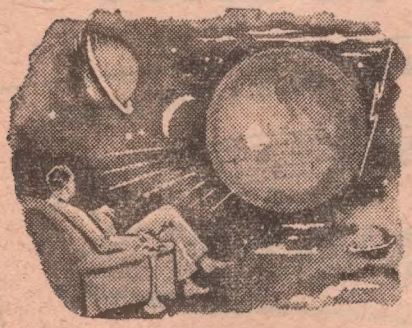

ALL of the intelligence of the universe is not centered on this small globe—the earth. Do you know that there are invisible forces and powers beyond this world that can—and do—influence you tremendously? If you could not see or hear, your present world would shrink greatly. Do you also know that you can do the opposite—extend your consciousness so that you can become a citizen of the universe? Stop being earth-bound! Let the Rosicrucian teachings unfold to you how your mind can annihilate space and cause you to experience a oneness with the Infinite and all of its worlds. Experience Cosmic Harmony!

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 6)

thinking a way out if there was a way, and somehow he always managed to find that way.

The Goodnight-Loving Trail

One of the bravest and greatest of the old trail drivers never lived to know that a trail drivers' association was ever formed. He was Oliver Loving, who with Charles Goodnight established the Goodnight-Loving Trail, a trail that will live in the memory of old trail drivers until the last one has passed on and the tales of adventure along this trail will be told and retold for years afterward.

The Goodnight-Loving Trail ran westward from north central Texas out across the Pecos River at Horseheads Crossing and on to Colorado. When one travels now over what is known as the Broadway of America, westward from Fort Worth, Texas, through Abilene, they pass over a part of the original trail, but gone, of course, are the lurking Indians waiting to scalp the hated palefaces, gone are the highwaymen, murderous outlaws who laid in wait for the traveler to kill and plunder.

The reason they are gone is due to the fact that there were many brave men among the trail drivers who were not afraid to fight, no matter how great the odds, and many of them laid down their lives for the future of the Southwest and the cattle industry, just as our brave boys on the battlefronts of this global war are laying down their lives now for the future of America.

Oliver Loving was one of the many trail drivers that went down fighting for the future of the cattle industry and the Southwestern range and the story of his last battle is one that is interesting as it shows what a really brave and remarkable character he was.

A Trusting Pioneer

To begin with Oliver Loving was not what one would call a smart Indian fighter. He was too trustful and not careful enough. It was hard for him to believe or to keep remembering that Indians would pounce upon palefaces and kill just for the joy of killing.

Often in camp along the trail at night he would build a fire and many times Goodnight and others associated with him would have to put out such fires and caution him about them as those fires were telltale signals to the Indians.

(Continued on page 74)

Fight INFANTILE PARALYSIS

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The Rio Kid lashed out with a hard fist before the guard could shoot again (CHAPTER XI)

GOLDEN CONQUEST

By DEAN OWEN

Greed-Maddened Renegades Goad Apaches to Evil Deeds that Threaten to Wipe Out the Arizona Territory—Until the Rio Kid Runs the Conspirators to Earth and Smashes Their Sinister Schemes!

CHAPTER I

River Fight

THE sun made a last golden stab at the darkening sky, casting fingers of red and yellow upon Castle Dome's rocky crown, then spread its fading light over the shifting sands, the mesquite and the willows that crowded close to the river. The air was warm, but an evening breeze carried the sweet smell of cool water and the tang of sage.

Soft light from the dying sun fell on the clean-cut features of Bob Pryor, once a cavalry officer in the Union Army, but since the end of the Civil War better known as the Rio Kid. Sitting his saddle in a tangle of

A FULL BOOK-LENGTH FRONTIER ACTION NOVEL

Death Lurked at the Fortress of the Sun—

willows, he was gazing at the mighty sweep of the Colorado. His blue eyes lighted in appreciation, for the scene was one of beauty. But his lips were a thin line in his tanned face, for there was grim business to be transacted in Yuma, a few miles up the river.

At the Rio Kid's side rode his constant saddle pard—smiling, dark-eyed Celestino Mireles, white teeth gleaming, his high-peaked sombrero set jauntily on his head. He was a high-bred Mexican, as his creamy coloring attested.

"The water she ees good to see, no?" he said, with a grin.

Their hurried trip across the arid wastes of Arizona, under a burning sun, made them appreciate the muddy waters of the Colorado.

Captain Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, lightly touched Saber, his mousy dun, with short cavalry spurs.

The war horse with the stripe down his back that showed he was of the "breed that never dies," stretched into a gallop, sand churning beneath his hoofs. Celestino, mounted on a splendid white-stockinged black, followed.

As they cut through the willows, the deep-throated blast of a river boat whistle stirred the evening silence. The Rio Kid pulled up Saber, staring at the flat-bottomed boat pushing upstream, its stern paddle churning the water.

Reining in in a thick stand of willows on the river bank, the Rio Kid pointed at the river boat as Celestino pulled up. A black-lettered sign over the stern read:

Dixie Star

"There's trouble on that boat," the Kid said grimly. "Somebody's in a tight spot."

Figures on the deck were barely visible in the gathering twilight. But they heard hoarse shouts of anger and the flat bark of a gun.

Men struggled on the boat deck where one man was fighting for his life, lashing out at half a dozen assailants. Always a champion of the underdog, the Rio Kid clenched his teeth, for he was helpless to intervene in the uneven battle, because of the boiling strip of water that separated him from the steamboat. Celestino's dark eyes, too, were fired with anger, for he shared the Rio Kid's ideas of fair play.

A LIGHT was in the wheel-house, and smoke poured from the stacks. The boat was moving slowly upstream, and the Rio Kid and Celestino walked their horses to keep abreast of it.

"We just land in this Yuma country and we're runnin' smack into trouble," the Rio Kid muttered. Celestino shrugged, watching those figures struggling on the boat deck.

"You nevair run from trouble, General."

"General," was the name the young Mexican had bestowed upon his friend ever since a day, long before, when Bob Pryor had rescued Celestino from Border bandits.

The Rio Kid did not answer Celestino in words, but pulled a gun from holster leather and cocked it, for at that moment the man who was putting up such a savage battle for his life on that boat deck, broke free. He leaped over the side into the muddy Colorado.

As he went under and his attackers converged at the deck rail, the Rio Kid brought up his gun. A head appeared on the river's surface.

Arms threshing wildly, the escaping man struck out for the shore.

Gun muzzles winked brightly, and bullets splattered on the water around the swimming man. The Rio Kid's eyes were smoky with anger at this deliberate attempt at murder. He sent three shots hammering across the boat deck, aiming high enough not to hit anyone. After all, the swimming man might be escaping from the law. But for those on deck to shoot him, while helpless in the water, was too much for the Rio Kid to stomach.

Celestino's dark eyes were bright with excitement. "They run for cover like the coyote!" he said, pointing at the scurrying figures on deck.

Those shots from the Rio Kid's gun had had their desired effect, for the gunmen had withdrawn their attention from the swimming man and were ducking behind piled crates at the steamboat's stern. There they cut loose with their own weapons, sending bullets whipping through willow branches, but the shots did no damage.

The boat did not halt its steady progress upstream, and finally only an occasional shot came from the deck. Those on board seemed to have lost interest in the man who had dived overboard.

"Dixie Star," the Rio Kid muttered. "I'll remember that boat. Mebbe we'll see it again in Yuma."

He neck-reined Saber and lined out for the spot where the swimming man had reached shore and was crawling through the mud. Suddenly the man sank down and didn't move.

With Celestino riding at his heels, the Rio Kid reached the fallen man and leaped out of saddle. Picking up the wet, bedraggled figure he carried the man to high ground. As he lowered him to the sand he saw that the fellow was lean and tall, with whipcord

muscles. His shock of red hair was plastered across his forehead. Freckles as big as copper pennies stood out on his pale cheeks.

He was groaning and muttering, as he lay there on the sand. The Rio Kid knelt down and bent his head. He caught the mumbled words:

"Travers—I got to get Tom Travers!"

The Rio Kid straightened and met the eyes of Celestino Mireles who had dismounted and stood beside him.

"And Tom Travers is one of the reasons we're headin' for Yuma," the ex-cavalry officer said soberly. "Looks like we might have run into somethin' right important."

Celestino nodded. "Yuma must be hot place. General Crook, he send for you to come there. So does Tom Travers." He pointed a slim dark finger at the redhead. "Now these hombre escape from river boat and say he got to get Tom Travers."

The Rio Kid was bending low over the redhead. The man's shirt had been torn and part of his chest was bare. Eyes narrowed, the Kid stared at the scar above the man's heart. But it was not a scar, he noted upon closer observation. It was a brand!

The man had been branded like a steer. The two crosses burned into the flesh made a weird pattern.

Then Celestino saw the brand and went tense.

"Las Cruces del Sol!" he exclaimed. "Crosses of the Sun. Thees sign I have seen on rocks in Mejico. Eet's Indian sign."

A LOW whistle escaped the Rio Kid's lips. More than ever now he had a feeling that he had embarked upon a grim, mysterious adventure. He had been conscious of that ever since he had received that letter from General George Crook, saying that the Rio Kid was urgently needed in Yuma. And the letter that had come from Tom Travers a former trooper who had served in Pryor's command during the War had strengthened the feeling.

BOB PRYOR

Travers was serving ten years in Yuma prison for attempted murder. This redhead who lay on the sand, had escaped from a river boat. He knew Tom Travers; at least he knew his name. And the redhead was branded with an Indian sign—Las Cruces del Sol.

The redhead seemed to be returning to life as Bob Pryor rubbed his wrists, pumped some of the water out of his lungs. Then color returned to the man's cheeks and suddenly he sat up, staring wildly at the Rio Kid. Mingled fear and desperation were in his eyes. He tried to get to his feet, but the Rio

Kid pushed him down.

"Ride her easy, stranger," he advised. "Yuh're with friends."

Evidently the man had been under some terrific strain and the swim from the Dixie Star had sapped the last of his strength. But that strength was returning now.

"I reckon yuh're the gents who saved my life," he said gratefully as he stared at the Rio Kid and Celestino. "But I got to be travelin'."

Again he tried to rise, but again the Rio Kid shoved him back on the sand. Pryor made a signal to Celestino and the young Mexican gathered wood and made a small fire. Soon he had coffee boiling over hot coals.

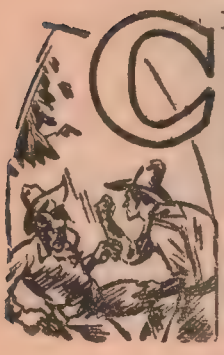
As they waited, the Rio Kid tried to get some information from the redhead. But the man told little except his name. He was Bill Knight, he said, and he had spent the last five years in Mexico. That was all he would say.

"Get a bait of grub under yore belt, and yuh'll feel more like talkin'," the Rio Kid finally said.

But Bill Knight shook his head. "I ain't talkin' about nothin'. Not till I see General Crook, and stop some mighty bloody business."

CHAPTER II

Skulkers



CRICKETS began singing their nightly song as the sun dipped below the horizon. The Rio Kid stripped saddles and Saber and the white-stockinged black. Saber nuzzled the Kid affectionately, then trotted up the bank. He would return at the Kid's whistle, but the black had to be hobbled.

Celestino had cooked bacon and beans. With cold biscuits, they made a fair meal.

Bill Knight huddled on the sand, wrapped in a blanket while his clothes dried by the fire. He was smoking, staring into the dancing flames. And as the Rio Kid watched the man, he realized that dread was riding him. At every crackle in the brush, every howl of a coyote, he stiffened and peered hard into the gloomy shadows.

Bob Pryor tossed his half-consumed cigarette into the camp-fire and looked at Knight.

"Mebbe yuh still don't want to talk," he said bluntly, "but as yuh was comin' to yuh mentioned Tom Travers. I want to know why."

Knight's jaw muscles tightened. The Rio Kid laid a hand on his arm.

"Listen," he said. "I got a letter from Travers, and I know he's in Yuma Prison. I thought a lot of Tom when he served under me in the War. He says he was framed. I believe him."

Bill Knight's gray eyes went hard as rock. "They tried to kill Tom," he said, "but the Law stepped in. Then they did the next best thing to get him out of their way, and railroaded him to prison."

Firelight played over Pryor's tanned face, revealing the grim line of his mouth and the cold depths of his eyes.

"I'll square it for Tom," he vowed.

Celestino lay on his side on the opposite side of the camp-fire, smoking, his dark eyes probing the shadows. It was best to be prepared for any eventuality, for they were only a few miles from Yuma.

The Rio Kid had started to ask Bill Knight another question when he suddenly stiffened, watching Saber. The dun beyond the camp-fire, had lifted his head and was staring up-river. The black kept on cropping grass, not having the keen hearing of Saber.

With a smooth, gliding motion, the Rio Kid reached Saber, ran his hand along the black stripe on the horse's back. When that stripe began to quiver, it was an infallible sign that danger threatened. It was quivering now.

Whirling, the Rio Kid kicked out the camp-fire. Celestino put out dying embers with a handful of sand. Bill Knight snatched up his clothes from the warm sand.

"This way!" ordered the Rio Kid, as he made out the dim shadows of four approaching riders.

The three ducked into the willows that grew close to the river bank. Celestino had his hand clamped over the black horse's muzzle, but Saber made no sound, being perfectly trained.

The riders halted a few yards up the river, and their voices, barely audible, reached the Rio Kid, Celestino and Bill Knight, crouched in the willows.

"Reckon he must have drowned," a man was saying. "We ain't seen nobody a-tall."

"The boss wants that gent bad," another man growled, "but he wants him dead."

Bit chains rattled as the horses tossed their heads. The Rio Kid, gun in his hand, listened intently, hoping to recognize their voices, should he hear them again. Bill Knight was silently slipping into his clothes.

"That feller must have got on the Dixie Star at Robertson's Landing," remarked the rider who had first spoken.

They were talking about Bill Knight, of course. The Rio Kid was conscious that the redhead stiffened beside him. The Kid also knew where Robertson's Landing was—at the mouth of the Colorado where it emptied into the Gulf of Baja California. Here

As the man went under, the Rio Kid sent three shots across the boat deck (CHAPTER I)

was where cargo from ocean steamers was shifted to flat-bottomed river boats such as the Dixie Star.

"Mebbe this gent we're lookin' for, ain't so important after all," complained one of the other riders halted on the river bank.

"That's what you say. But I say it's lucky I found him hidin' in a packin' box. When he come out fightin' I seen Las Cruces del Sol. He was branded. And that means he came from the Fortress of the Sun. Run away, likely. Like that Tom Travers that's in Yuma pen."

"Let's head back. If that hombre hangs around Yuma we'll nail him."

The men moved back upstream, the hoofs of their horses fading in the distance. Soon there was no sound save the lap of the river against the bank and the chirp of the crickets.

The Rio Kid stood there in the gloom, turning over in his mind what he had heard. Bill Knight had escaped from some place called the "Fortress of the Sun." Evidently Tom Travers once had escaped from the same place.

CELESTINO moved close to the Rio Kid, pouching his gun.

"What ees thees Fortress of the Sun, General?" he asked in a tense whisper.

The Rio Kid shrugged. "Quien sabe? But I'll bet we find out when we see General Crook in Yuma."

He turned to say something to Bill Knight. The man was gone! An oath escaped the Rio Kid's lips. Both he and Celestino hunted in the shadows, but found no sign of Bill Knight. The Kid did not want to risk striking a match to look for tracks in the sand. Those riders might still be hanging around, and matchlight would make good targets of Celestino Mireles and Bob Pryor.

Back further in the willows, the saddle pards rolled up in their blankets. The Rio Kid stared at the bright stars with steel-blue eyes that had seen much—reckless cavalry charges in the War Between the States, fights with Indians on the Kansas plains, nights filled with the cries of savages, and days that echoed to the blasts of renegade guns. Lying there in his blanket, the thoughts made a grim line of his usually good-natured lips.

The Rio Kid thought of Bill Knight, and the crude brand the man wore. He thought of the Fortress of the Sun. And again the Rio Kid knew that somewhere at the bottom of this mystery was a man who sought to impose a rule of greed over his less fortunate brothers.

His eyes began to close. He and Celestino had ridden far in answer to the urgent appeal of General Crook, and already he could hear the steady breathing of the sleeping Celestino. Soon Bob Pryor dropped into a deep sleep. Saber would be on guard. . . .

At daylight the Rio Kid and Celestino headed north along the river toward Yuma. As they saw that the tracks, left by Bill Knight, moved in the same direction, there was a frown on the Kid's forehead. He tried to puzzle out Knight's strange behavior. There seemed to be only one answer. Knight was not trusting any man until he saw General Crook.

The Kid's campaign hat, tipped back, revealed close-cropped chestnut hair. His shoulders were broad, his body tapering at the waist, for his was the ideal build and height for a cavalryman. The chest beneath the blue Army tunic he wore was deep, and crossed cartridge belts hung from his lean hips. His black cavalry boots glistened in the sunlight as he touched Saber's flanks with blunt cavalry spurs.

Captain Pryor, the Rio Kid, had ridden with danger and death in the United States Cavalry. Two great commanders in the Civil War—Custer and Sheridan—had singled him out for special honors because of his reckless bravery and steady nerves, and his ability as a scout. For, raised on the Rio Grande, Bob Pryor had learned tracking and scouting almost as soon as he could ride.

When he had returned from the War, to find that his parents had been killed by Border renegades, Bob Pryor had sworn to make war on this ruthless breed. It was then that he had become the Rio Kid, known throughout the West now, as a valiant fighting man on whom the helpless and oppressed could rely. His unquenched thirst for adventure was now helping to make the West a place where decent men and women could make their homes.

When the sprawling buildings of Yuma came in sight, Bob Pryor swung his gaze to the pile of stone that was the Territorial Prison. He thought of Tom Travers, laughing, happy-go-lucky Travers, condemned to spend ten years of his life behind those grim walls.

Celestino's voice broke in on the Rio Kid's thoughts. He was pointing to a boat, tied up at a wharf.

"There ees thee boat! Thee one Senor Knight was on."

The Rio Kid saw the Dixie Star then. Smoke crawled lazily out of the stacks as the boat rocked gently at her moorings.

Nearby was a long, rambling warehouse. The Rio Kid pulled up Saber, staring at a sign painted on the wall.

OCEAN-RIVER LINES

Henry Bruner, Owner.
Ship Your Freight Via
The Colorado to San Francisco on
The *Dixie Star* and the *San Pedro.*

"Henry Bruner, uh?" the Rio Kid said thoughtfully. "So that's who owns the Dixie Star."

Two men had been standing by the warehouse wall. At sight of the Rio Kid and Celestino, they swung onto a pair of ground-anchored horses and came riding toward them.

THE Rio Kid recognized the dark-faced man in the lead. His name was Gabe Reel. He was half-white, half-Cherokee and the Kid had seen him hanging around the San Carlos Indian Reservation not long before. The rider with Reel was a tall, thin-faced man with a greasy brown beard. A dead cigarette hung from his lower lip.

The two halted their horses across the road so as to block it.

"Hold on there!" Reel snapped, his voice deep, sharp, as he leveled a finger at the Rio Kid. "Yuh look like the hombre who fired on the Dixie Star last night. I saw yuh through a telescope."

The Rio Kid halted Saber, and Celestino reined in his black. The Kid's jaw went hard as he looked Reel over. The half-breed wore a fancy shirt, checkered vest and tailored coat. Heavy black sideburns and a black mustache adorned his swarthy face. He wore double guns beneath his coat.

There was a grim smile on the Rio Kid's lips as he saw that Reel didn't recall him as having been at the Indian Reservation. But the Rio Kid not only had seen the man before but now recognized his voice. Reel had been one of the men who had been searching for Bill Knight the evening before.

"Mebbe I did sling some lead at the boat," Pryor said coldly. "But I don't like cold-blooded killin's."

Reel's lips curled. "Yuh let a loco gent we was bringin' to Yuma to turn over to the law get away. Henry Bruner wants a word with yuh."

The Rio Kid wasn't used to being ordered around, but he wanted to learn all he could about this mysterious business. He knew, too, that he was facing danger, for the black stripe down Saber's back was quivering.

Saber, however, was naturally belligerent, always ready to quarrel with anyone, save the man who rode him—and equally as willing to do battle with another horse. Now as Reel moved his horse in closer, Saber bared yellowed teeth and nipped. Reel's horse squealed and reared and it took several seconds to get the animal quieted.

His thin-faced companion had moved his own horse so that the Kid would be in a cross-fire if it came to shooting. But Celestino had his eye on the man.

"Cuss yuh!" Reel snarled when he had got his horse quieted. "I ought to blast yuh here and now."

But the Rio Kid merely shrugged his broad shoulders.

"If Henry Bruner wants to see me," he drawled, "let's get goin'."

Gabe Reel's jaw dropped in surprise. Evidently he had not figured the Rio Kid would agree so easily. His anger unabated, he turned his horse and led the way up the dusty road.

Riding close behind the Rio Kid, Celestino Mireles was a colorful figure in his velvet pants and jacket. The wide red sash at his waist held knife and pistols. His features were aristocratic for his parents had been high-born Mexicans. His father, a hidalgo, had been shot down by bandidos and although the Rio Kid had not arrived on the scene in time to prevent that, he had been able to snatch the youth from a like fate.

From that day, Celestino Mireles had dedicated his life to serving others with the Rio Kid, following him across the trails of the West. And always he was at hand when danger threatened his General.

As the Rio Kid dismounted at the hitch-rack in front of the warehouse, he was anxious to meet Henry Bruner. Somehow he had an idea that from the owner of the Dixie Star he might learn more about the mysterious Fortress of the Sun, and the equally mysterious "they" of whom Bill Knight had spoken so bitterly.

CHAPTER III

Strange Mission

GABE REEL jerked a hand toward the warehouse.

"Bruner's in there," he snarled

Reel and his thin-faced companion stayed outside as the Rio Kid entered the building. He had given Celestino a signal to stay outside and keep an eye on Reel and his pard.

It was an outer office, with roll-top desks, book shelves, and an open safe in one corner that the Rio Kid entered. A ledger, open on a high desk, indicated that the clerk had stepped out for a moment.

Then the Rio Kid stiffened as his keen ears heard voices coming from an inner office. The voice of the man who was speaking had a peculiar twang.

"But I tell you, General, the situation is plainly exaggerated! Your problem is to keep the Apaches under control. They're in the San Pedro Valley—quite a ways from Yuma. Let the Mexican government worry about what happens south of the Line."

"President Juarez of Mexico is having his troubles," a booming voice cut in. "Now that Maximilian has been executed, Juarez is busy cleaning out factions who are interested

only in lining their own pockets."

Through the half-opened door to the inner office the Rio Kid saw a short, cherubic man at a flat-topped table, looking at someone the Rio Kid could not see. But he had no need to, for he had recognized the voice of General George Crook with surprise. The last place he had expected to find the brilliant soldier was in the office of Henry Bruner.

Before the Rio Kid could make his presence known, General Crook started talking again.

"I came to you, Bruner, because your steamboat runs down into the Gulf of Baja California. I thought maybe you had heard something of this Fortress of the Sun they're talking about."

The Rio Kid saw Bruner's face go dark at the general's acid tone. The man's eyes were crafty and he showed extreme nervousness as he lit a cheroot.

He shrugged his fat shoulders. "They are only stories, General," he declared. "I've heard of the Fortress of the Sun, yes, but it is just one of those tales—nothing more than a figment of somebody's imagination."

As Bruner spoke so positively, though, the Rio Kid was remembering the brand on Bill Knight's chest. A clerk came in through a side door at that moment, and the Kid told him he was waiting to see Bruner.

"Tell him it's Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, that's waitin'," he said in a loud voice, and instantly got results.

"The Rio Kid!" the General exclaimed as he burst through the door of the private office. "Captain Bob Pryor! The very man I've been waiting for!"

The Rio Kid grinned and his blue eyes twinkled as he saw the smiling bearded face of General George Crook. The General stepped forward, a vigorous, dynamic man. He took the Rio Kid's hand, pumped it vigorously.

"Captain Pryor," he said, "I'm mighty glad to see you." And it actually did seem as if a load had been lifted from his shoulders as his eyes ran over the Rio Kid's trim figure. "I haven't seen you since you were with General Custer at Baxter Springs," he observed.

The clerk was watching Bob Pryor admiringly. Few men had not heard of the exploits of the Rio Kid. But Henry Bruner impatiently waved the clerk outside and closed the door as General Crook led the Rio Kid into the private office.

The Kid was grinning at General Crook's reminiscences, but the grin tightened a bit as he saw Henry Bruner regarding him queerly out of colorless eyes.

Bruner came forward, a cigar slanting out of his thick lips. The General laid an affectionate hand on the Rio Kid's arm.

"Mr. Bruner," he said, "I want you to meet Captain Bob Pryor, the best scout and all-around fighting man it has ever been my pleasure to know. Since the War, he's been known as the Rio Kid."

Pryor shook hands with Bruner, noting the soft, clammy palm. The owner of the Dixie Star stepped back, a forced smile on his lips, a shrewd light in his eyes as he took in the Rio Kid's campaign hat, his Army tunic, his dark blue pants.

"Glad to know you, Pryor," he said.

"One of yore men, Gabe Reel, said yuh wanted to see me," the Rio Kid said bluntly.

The General looked at the Rio Kid sharply. Bruner's face flushed for an instant, then he shrugged.

"You must be the man who fired on the Dixie Star last night," he said. "You shot high so as not to endanger any lives, however."

"I can assure you that whatever Pryor did he believed he was doing the right thing," General Crook told Bruner promptly. "What was it all about, Pryor?"

THE Rio Kid told about Knight escaping from the Dixie Star, and of the attempt on Knight's life while he was swimming for shore. But he said nothing of the brand, Las Cruces del Sol, nor of the other events that had transpired.

"The man who escaped was a prospector," Henry Bruner explained, with a smile that was plainly forced. "He had gone mad in Baja California. He stowed away on my boat and when my men found him, they were going to bring him to Yuma, to turn him over to the authorities. If my men got a bit overzealous, I'm sorry. I wouldn't tolerate their shooting down a man without a chance."

General Crook pursed his lips thoughtfully, but when he spoke it was to excuse himself on the grounds that he had important matters to discuss with the Rio Kid.

Outside of the warehouse, Gabe Reel and his thin-faced companion were lounging beside the building. They looked surprised when the Rio Kid came out with General Crook. They were still more surprised when Celestino Mireles, flashing a warm smile, was introduced and the Mexican youth and the Rio Kid rode off with General Crook.

The General's headquarters were at the Yuma House. Arriving there Celestino took the horses to the livery stable while the General led the Rio Kid to his rooms. When they were seated in easy chairs, the General stroked his beard as his gaze rested thoughtfully on the clean-cut features of the Rio Kid.

"Captain Pryor," he said then, "I have a strange mission for you. It also is a dangerous mission, one that has probably already cost the life of one of my most trusted men."

The Rio Kid sat silently, although his

nerves were tingling with excitement at the prospect of fresh adventure. From the window he could see the rooftops of Yuma, baking in the hot Arizona sunlight. He rolled a smoke, waiting for the General to go on. And it seemed to him, studying the officer, that General Crook's worried eyes betrayed the deep responsibility he felt at being named by President Grant as the man to erase the Indian menace from Arizona once and for all.

"Captain Thomas Jeffords is the one white friend of Cochise, the Apache chief," the General said abruptly. "He's going to try and get Cochise to leave the warpath and settle down on the reservation."

The Rio Kid nodded soberly, for in his

CELESTINO MIRELES

mind's eye were scenes of destruction he himself had witnessed—ranchers shot down, their womenfolk dying by their sides.

Cochise had left a bloody trail across Arizona.

The Rio Kid knew Captain Jeffords well. Only a few months before, the Kid had met Cochise at Jefford's ranch. The Indian chief had admired Saber and offered much gold for him. When the Rio Kid had refused to sell, Cochise had called for a race between the fastest Indian pony and Saber. The Kid's dun had won easily. Cochise had dubbed Saber the Horse-That-Runs-With-Wings.

"If Jeffords and I can get the Apache situation settled, then I can turn my attention elsewhere," General Crook said, studying the trim fighting man who sat opposite him. "Until that time I need a man to undertake a dangerous mission."

He nodded as he saw the Rio Kid's eyes light in anticipation.

"Still ready for action, I see." He leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Strange stories are coming out of the country around the Gulf of Baja California. Some insidious force is at work down there, one that I fear might eventually become a definite threat to the Territory of Arizona. Pryor, I've heard these stories from many sources. Friendly Indians have brought tales of a weird place called the Fortress of the Sun. Have you heard anything about it?"

The Rio Kid then told General Crook more about Bill Knight and his fight on the Dixie Star. He also told how Gabe Reel had mentioned the Fortress of the Sun the night before when the Kid and Celestino had overheard him and three other men talking while they had paused in their search for the escaped Bill Knight.

"According to what I heard," the Rio Kid said earnestly, "Tom Travers escaped like Knight did, from that Fortress of the Sun. I'm seein' Travers at the prison, soon's we finish here. I'll get his story."

The General was surprised to learn that Tom Travers was in Yuma Prison. He remembered the smiling trooper. But even more pressing matters occupied his mind now.

"President Grant has instructed me to get the Indian situation in hand," he said seriously. "I'm to use diplomacy—the sword only as a last resort. That's why I'm counting on Jeffords to handle Cochise. And you, Captain Pryor, can investigate this place they call the Fortress of the Sun."

A MOMENT of silence passed while General Crook stood staring out the window, hands clasped behind his back, shoulders squared. He fully realized the tremendous responsibility the President had placed in his hands.

"Do you think Bruner might be havin' a hand in this business?" the Rio Kid asked after a moment.

General Crook turned, a frown wrinkling his brow. "I never condemn a man until I have proof. So far, Bruner has been a help to us. He has a Government contract to ship in supplies from San Francisco."

The Rio Kid nodded. "But don't forget that Bruner's men on the Dixie Star were tryin' to kill Knight. And Gabe Reel, one of Bruner's gunmen, seemed all-fired anxious to find Knight and put a bullet in him."

But the General hesitated to believe that Bruner had any hand in the mysterious business. The Rio Kid had to admire this fighting officer, who insisted on believing in a man until proved treacherous.

The General began talking again as he paced back and forth across the narrow room.

"There's been unrest in Mexico since Maxmilian's execution. President Juarez is

doing a fine job rebuilding his country, but this trouble of which I spoke is pretty far from Mexico City. Juarez won't be able to do much."

"Any idea who's behind it?"

General Crook shrugged. "There's no definite proof. But one of Maximilian's supporters in the Gulf country was Rubio Cibola. Since Maximilian lost his Mexican throne, Cibola is believed to be trying to stir up trouble against President Juarez. Whether he has any connection with the Fortress of the Sun, I cannot tell."

As the Rio Kid sat there listening, he was fully aware that he was about to embark upon an adventure so baffling that there were no definite leads. Only wild rumors—and they could mean a lot, or nothing at all.

General Crook walked over and laid a hand on the Rio Kid's shoulder.

"I want to impress upon you the dangers of your mission," he said. "You remember Jeb Miller?"

Pryor nodded. "He was one of the best scouts under General Custer. I knew him well."

The General's face was stony. "Jeb Miller was sent down on the same mission some time ago. Nothing has been heard from him."

There was a tense set to the Rio Kid's jaw. "When do I leave, sir?"

General Crook's face lightened, and finally he smiled.

"I knew you'd feel that way, Captain Pryor," said the man in whose hands was the future of Arizona. "You can leave as soon as you're ready. The entire matter is in your hands."

The Rio Kid nodded, then suddenly his eyes narrowed as his glance shot to the hall door. Years on the danger trails had accented his keen hearing. Riders were passing the hotel, the hoofs of their horses making muffled sounds in the dust. A boat whistled on the river. Yet the Rio Kid's trained ears heard the soft tread of a boot outside the door.

General Crook sensed what was up and went on talking. Pryor moved cautiously toward the door and suddenly yanked it open. Gabe Reel stood there, his fist raised, as if about to knock on the door. His dark eyes were twin pools of hatred as he stared at Pryor.

"I got a letter for General Crook," he said surlily, and extended it.

The Rio Kid took the letter, watched Reel turn and march stiffly down the stairs to the main floor. Lips pursed thoughtfully, the Kid closed the door, handed the envelope to General Crook.

"You think he was listening?" There was a questioning light in the General's eyes as he tore open the envelope.

The Rio Kid nodded. "I'm sure of it."

General Crook read the letter, and shrugged.

"Henry Bruner wants us to have supper with him tonight," he said.

The Rio Kid smiled grimly. "His messenger didn't wait for an answer. Guess Bruner figgered yuh'd accept."

Promising to meet the General at his room that evening, the Rio Kid left the hotel and found Celestino at the livery stable. Quickly he told what had transpired. Celestino's dark eyes glowed when he heard of the adventure upon which they were to embark.

The Rio Kid told Celestino to spend the day trying to find Bill Knight. The man must be in town, because he had been anxious to see General Crook. Bill Knight probably would be as anxious now to see the Rio Kid again, since the entire matter of the Fortress of the Sun had been turned over to him.

"I'm goin' to see Tom Travers at Yuma Prison," the Kid said. "Mebbe I'll find one more piece that'll fit in this puzzle."

CHAPTER IV

Dead Men Can't Tell

MIST lay heavy over the mighty Colorado River as Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, rode Saber toward the stone walls of the Territorial Prison. The sun was beginning to show its real heat as it climbed higher into the cloudless sky. The Kid looked at those grim walls ahead and his heart went out to Tom Travers, the faithful trooper.

As the Rio Kid came to the prison gate, he turned Saber in at the hitch-rail by one wall. He dismounted and it was then that he saw a tall, thin man at the gate. The Rio Kid recognized him at once as the man who had ridden with Gabe Reel that morning.

The fellow was talking to a squat, scar-faced, yellow-haired guard. The guard nodded and grinned, then slipped away from the barred gate.

The thin-faced man came shuffling down the dusty road from the gate. When he saw the Rio Kid his eyes widened and he dropped a hand to the scarred butt of a low-riding gun. Then he went on until he disappeared around a corner.

"He was shore up to somethin'," the Rio Kid thought

When he reached the prison gate, the scar-faced guard was not in sight. The guard now just inside the gate was young, clear-eyed, and had an aggressive jaw. He looked the Rio

Kid up and down, when the Kid said he wanted to see the prison super, then opened the gate and pointed to a building off the left of the prison yard.

"Yuh can see Homer Jason in there," he said.

Like all such places the grim walls and the barred windows of the prison were oppressive. Men in the long cell blocks called for water. Trusties, with sunken cheeks and defeat in their eyes, shuffled across the prison yard. Guards carrying sawed-off shotguns strolled by.

The Rio Kid faced Homer Jason across a desk in the prison office. The prison superintendent was a tall man with iron-gray hair. He was sorting through a pile of papers, swearing at the heat. A pitcher of water, covered with a towel, was at his elbow. He picked up a fan, glowering at his visitor.

"Well, what do you want?"

The Rio Kid's eyes sparked angrily. "I've come to see Tom Travers. He's a prisoner here. I'd like a few minutes with him, if possible. I'm Bob Pryor."

Jason's face lighted. He tossed the fan to the desk, extended his hand.

"Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid," he exclaimed. "General Crook was speaking of yuh only yesterday."

A warm smile replaced the grim set of Pryor's lips. But that troubled look returned to Jason's lined face as he scribbled a pass for the Rio Kid.

"This place is a mad-house!" he complained. "We can't get guards. The pay ain't so good and anyhow not many men want such jobs." He waved a deprecatory hand toward the prison yard. "I'll let yuh see Travers in his cell. He's sleeping now. He's a trusty and works nights, cleaning up the mess hall.

The Rio Kid thanked Jason and walked down a shadowed corridor. A guard looked at his pass and let him into the cell block where the trusties stayed. The cell doors were open, for most of the trusties were in the prison yard, performing their assigned tasks.

A lump rose in Pryor's throat as he neared Travers' cell. He had not seen Tom since both had served with Sheridan during the Civil War. Fate certainly led men down strange paths. It was hard to think of Travers, laughing, smiling, eager for adventure, risking his life in wild charges at the side of his captain, Bob Pryor, as now being a prison inmate.

The corridor was empty. Only faint sounds came from the prison yard. But as the Rio Kid stepped into Travers' cell every nerve in his body was tense, for curiously, dread had enveloped him like a cloak.

He saw the double bunks, the neat stack of newspapers on a box, a worn copy of the Bible, then something else—Tom Travers'

Hardly had the gun flash at the window died than both the Rio Kid's weapons roared

huddled form on the floor, with the hilt of a knife protruding from his back.

In the space of one breath the Rio Kid saw all this. Then warning bells were clanging in his brain. He whirled, hands dipping for his guns. There in the hall stood Scar-face, the guard Bruner's man had been talking to at the gate. A vicious smile was on his thick lips as he balanced a long-bladed knife in his right hand.

With a swift overhand motion, the knife came speeding toward the Rio Kid, who tried to duck as he brought up his right-hand gun and fired. But the bullet spanged off an iron bar as the Kid felt the bite of the knife across the top of his shoulder.

Sharp pain ran down his left arm. He was off balance, but raised his guns for another shot. Too late, though, for the scar-faced guard already had raced out of sight. The Rio Kid ran up the hall, blood dripping off the ends of his fingers. When he reached the end of the corridor, he found the barred door locked. Scar-face had escaped all right.

SHOUTS and the pounding of booted feet came down the corridor. Guards were running toward the Rio Kid, attracted by the shot. The Kid holstered his guns. A tall, sandy-haired guard ran up, holding a sawed-off shotgun.

"Get yore hands up!" he commanded.

Another guard unlocked the barred door and ran down the corridor to Travers' cell.

"Somebody's killed Travers!" he yelled. He pointed an accusing finger at the Rio Kid. "I bet he done it!"

The Rio Kid stood there, hands raised, trying to tell the guards about Scar-face, but they ordered him to shut up.

Terrible thoughts churned through the Rio Kid's mind. Tom Travers had been murdered in cold blood—knifed! And right then and there he vowed he would kill that scar-faced knife-thrower if he had to follow him to Hades and back!

Homer Jason, the prison superintendent came running up the corridor, his iron-gray hair cascading over his forehead. He eyed the Rio Kid, glanced into the cell where Tom Travers lay. An oath escaped him. He whirled on the Rio Kid.

"Yuh better do some explainin'!"

The Rio Kid's jaw was hard, his blue eyes cold as winter ice. He nodded at the sandy-haired guard.

"Tell this jasper to put down that shotgun. The killer's gettin' away and that gun ain't doin' any good here."

Quickly Pryor told of finding Travers' body, and of how almost immediately the scar-faced guard had thrown a knife at him.

Jason smashed a fist into his open palm.

"That scar-faced gent is Luke Grange! He's only been here a couple of weeks."

He barked orders to the guards in the corridor, and they went rushing away. Some were going to lock the main gate so no one could get out.

The sandy-haired guard remained with Jason and the Rio Kid. Moving his arm steadily to keep it from stiffening, the Rio Kid went into Travers' cell and knelt beside the dead man. Quickly he went through his pockets, but found nothing but some tobacco and a battered silver watch—a huge stem-winder.

Angered by this cold-blooded killing Homer Jason and the guard stood watching grimly. The Rio Kid saw scratches on the watch-case which indicated that the back had been pried off many times. With a pocket knife, he removed the back himself. There was a folded paper inside. He smoothed it out. Scrawled on it was:

> Don't give up.
> I'm seeing General Crook.
> B. K.

He showed the note to Jason. The prison superintendent nodded.

"Travers got this early this morning. It was handed to the guard at the main gate. When I opened it—I open all mail—I thought some friend was trying to use influence with General Crook to get Travers' case reviewed."

Quickly the Rio Kid asked Jason if he knew who had left the note for Travers.

"The guard said it was a redhead, an hombre who looked like he'd been sleepin' in a back alley."

"I reckon I know who it was," the Rio Kid said, as he stuck the note in his pocket. "But somebody else was gettin' mighty nervous—wanted Travers shut up so's he couldn't talk."

He had not forgotten the thin-faced man with Gabe Reel, the man who had been talking to Scar-face at the prison gate. But he kept that to himself. The fewer people who knew all the facts in the case, the easier it would be for the Rio Kid to get to the bottom of the thing.

Homer Jason ran long fingers through his iron-gray hair.

"I'm sorry I doubted yuh, Pryor," he said apologetically. "But this prison situation is beyond me." He laid a hand on the sandy-haired guard's shoulder. "Byers, here, is a good guard and he's honest, as are most of my boys. But now and then a gent like that scar-faced Luke Grange gets in." He shrugged and the lines in his face seemed to deepen.

AGAIN the Rio Kid knelt beside Travers' body. He took the knife from the man's back and turned him over. He stared at that lean face, pale now in death. No longer would Tom Travers answer to the thrilling notes of "Boots and Saddles."

Pryor unbuttoned the dead man's shirt, exposing his chest, though already certain of what he would find. He was right for over the heart was a brand—Las Cruces del Sol. Crosses of the Sun.

After two guards were called to take care of Travers' body, the Rio Kid searched the corridor, and found the knife that Luke Grange had thrown at him. It was a long-bladed throwing knife, like that which had been in Travers' back.

In the prison office, the Rio Kid had his arm bandaged by the prison doctor.

"I know it's a bit irregular," he said to Jason then, "but I'd like Tom Travers to have a military funeral. He died for his country."

Homer Jason naturally was surprised, but agreed to the Rio Kid's request. He and the Kid were discussing funeral arrangements when the guards who had been sent to hunt down Luke Grange returned to the office. Grange had got through the main gate before it was locked, they had discovered, so the guards were sent to comb the town for him.

CHAPTER V

The Girl

AN HOUR went by and finally the guards returned. Luke Grange could not be found. That, however, was no surprise to the Rio Kid. He had not been waiting for the scar-faced man to be returned to the prison, but instead had spent the time going over the papers which dealt with the trial and conviction of Tom Travers.

Travers had come up from Mexico, so the report stated. In one of Yuma's back alleys he had tried to murder one Gabe Reel. The Law had shown up then and Reel had sworn out a complaint against Travers. One of the prosecution witnesses had been Henry Bruner, steamboat owner. He had just happened to be passing when the fracas started.

Travers had offered no defense, so had been found guilty and sentenced to ten years.

"Travers was afraid to talk," the Rio Kid decided finally.

Seeing Bruner's name in the case against Travers brought knots of muscle to either side of the Rio Kid's fighting jaw. He handed papers back to Homer Jason and thanked him for his assistance.

"Guess Luke Grange has sprouted wings," he said grimly.

Byers, the sandy-haired guard, walked with Pryor to the main gate.

"Grange is a knife-thrower all right," he said. "He's always showin' off for the rest of us, throwin' knives at a post in the prison yard." The guard cleared his throat. "I know yuh're goin' after Grange. I'd like to go with yuh. Travers was a good sort."

The Rio Kid shook his head. "You stick on the job here. I'll take care of Grange."

The gate clanged shut and the Rio Kid mounted Saber. The mousy dun flicked his ears and pranced, as if sensing the adventure that lay ahead.

The Rio Kid sat the saddle a moment, staring at the prison walls. Then his eyes lifted to the hot blue sky.

"Ride 'em easy, Tom Travers," he murmured. "You was always a good trooper."

The Rio Kid rode back toward the main street of Yuma, his face set in somber lines. Tom Travers' death had affected him deeply, and he was certain Luke Grange had been planted at the prison as a guard for the express purpose of killing Travers. Then the Rio Kid recalled the thin-faced man who had been talking to Grange at the main gate.

"I'll bet that jasper give Grange orders to finish Travers quick," he thought. "Somebody was afraid he'd talk."

At the River Hotel, the Rio Kid rented a room. He tried to find Celestino, but the Mexican youth was nowhere to be found, so Pryor spent the next hour getting things in shape for the trip to the Fortress of the Sun. He bought extra cartridges and a new rifle. He ran into Celestino as he was returning to the hotel.

The Mexican had Bill Knight in tow, and was smiling. The redhead's tall frame was gaunt and his clothes hung loose on his big-boned figure. His hair stood on end and there was a wild look in his eyes.

"I seen General Crook," he blurted. "He told me you was takin' care of everything."

The Rio Kid nodded, led the way to his hotel room and shut the door. For a moment Bill Knight stood in the center of the room, a scowl on his forehead.

"I run out on yuh last night, because I wasn't shore about you fellers," he said bluntly. "But if General Crook says yuh're all right, that's good enough for me."

"General Crook is an Army officer," said the Rio Kid, "and he can't do nothin' in the open about things that happen in Mexico. That's why he's tagged me for the job."

As the Rio Kid motioned Knight toward a chair, he could see that the man had been through much. There were lines on his freckled face and his lips were grim.

When Pryor told him of the death of Tom Travers, and showed him the note he had taken from Travers' watch, Bill Knight swore.

"I sent that in this mornin'," Knight explained. "I didn't want Tom to think everybody had run out on him."

"Why didn't Tom tell about the Fortress

of the Sun at his trial?"

Bill Knight shook his head. "Nobody would have believed him. And Cibola's men would've killed him if he had."

"Who is Rubio Cibola?" asked the Rio Kid. "General Crook says mebbe he's behind this whole business."

Knight's gray eyes glittered with hatred. "He's a loco gent who thinks he's a descendant of Coronado." Knight took a deep breath. "He's got gold enough to buy hisself an army. But I'll show yuh the way to his Fortress of the Sun. We'll spike Cibola's plans once and for all.

CELESTINO grinned at the Rio Kid. With Bill Knight to show them the way much valuable time would be saved. The Rio Kid stepped to the hotel window, looked down upon the rutted street, now crowded with teams, wagons and saddle horses.

A dusty stage-coach was just pulling up in front of the hotel. Passengers alighted. A fat drummer with a sample case. Two men in range clothes. Then a pretty girl in a gray traveling suit, and with her black hair caught in a knot at the nape of her neck, stepped out of the coach. She stood on the boardwalk, twirling a parasol on her shoulder.

Bill Knight looked down at the girl and gave a low whistle of surprise.

"Laurita!" Knight exclaimed. "She's come back!"

The girl seemed to feel the eyes of Knight and the Rio Kid. She glanced up, her dark eyes widening when she saw Bill Knight. Color flushed her cheeks. Then she picked up her skirts with her left hand and climbed the hotel steps.

But all of the Rio Kid's attention was not focused on her, for he had seen a man who stood in the shadows of the gallery of the saloon across the street. The thin-faced man who had been with Gabe Reel that morning. The man who had been talking to Luke Grange at the prison gate.

Knight started for the door. The Rio Kid grabbed him by the shoulder, but Knight pulled free.

"I got to see Laurita, and you ain't stoppin' me!"

Anger sparked in Knight's eyes. He clenched his fists.

"Calm down, Knight," the Rio Kid advised. "Who's the girl?"

"Me and Tom Travers worked for her dad, old Miguel Sandoval. Laurita was safe in San Francisco. What's she doin' in Yuma?"

He strode across the room, opened the door and went downstairs. The Rio Kid followed him. In the lobby he glanced at Laurita Sandoval admiringly, but his face clouded as he walked to a window and saw that the thin-faced man was gone. The Rio Kid was certain then that the man had known he had been seen, and that Bill Knight's life was in danger. And the Rio Kid needed Bill desperately to lead the way to the Fortress of the Sun.

Celestino joined the Rio Kid, both watching Bill Knight talking to the girl. Celestino's eyes lighted, for he was romantic by nature and it took but one look to tell that Bill Knight was in love with the girl he called Laurita. But Celestino, like the Rio Kid, had dedicated his life to the danger trails, and beautiful women had no part in his own reckless, dare-devil life.

Bill Knight led Laurita toward the Rio Kid and Celestino. She seemed to be protesting, her red lips firm and her face flushed.

But Knight was as determined as she, as he urged the beautiful dark-haired girl across the worn carpet.

As Knight made the introductions, the girl nodded coolly. Celestino swept off his sombrero, bowing low. The Rio Kid removed his hat, a puzzled light in his eyes. For it was plain to him that the girl did not want to see Bill Knight.

She turned to the redhead. "I didn't expect to see you in Yuma." Her voice was tense, as if she were living in the shadow of some nameless fear.

There was an angry light in Bill Knight's gray eyes. "Yore father sent yuh to Frisco. Yuh're not safe here. Yuh're takin' the first stage back."

The girl's dark eyes clouded. "I'm sorry I had to see you here. I had hoped that the past could stay buried." Then she swept across the lobby to the desk.

Knight stood there as if he had been struck. His face was pale and his freckles stood out darkly. His teeth were clenched so tight that the veins in his neck stood out.

"I reckon the sooner we leave here, the better I'll like it," he said bitterly. Turning on his heel, he climbed the stairs.

"Keep an eye on him, Celestino," the Rio Kid said. "This don't add up."

Celestino took the stairs two at a time and the Rio Kid sauntered over to the desk where the clerk was talking to Laurita.

"I ain't got a room left, lady," he was saying apologetically. "I can't help it. Town's filled up."

THE girl's shoulders seemed to droop. She started to pick up the expensive cowhide bag at her feet, where the stage-coach driver had deposited it, but looked up, startled as the Rio Kid touched her arm.

"I'll be glad to let yuh have our room, miss," he said gravely. And before the girl could protest, he told the clerk, "Give Miss Sandoval Room Twenty-eight. Soon's it's cleaned up, she can move in."

The clerk whipped the register around for the girl to sign. She started to speak to the Rio Kid, then picked up the pen and signed her name.

The Rio Kid picked up her bag, and walked with her across the lobby to a big chair. The girl sat down with a sigh. She seemed tired after her long trip on the stage-coach. She kept twisting a lace handkerchief in her hands.

The Rio Kid cleared his throat. "I take it you and Bill Knight are old friends."

The girl turned her head aside and he saw the shine of tears in her eyes.

"I'd rather not talk about that," she said. Her voice was low and she spoke with the barest trace of Spanish accent.

"Yuh're in trouble," Pryor said kindly. "Mebbe I can help if yuh'll explain things."

The girl looked up, her lips trembling. "But there is no use. It's too late."

She lowered her head, and the Rio Kid knew she was crying.

"Nothin' so bad it couldn't be worse," the Rio Kid said philosophically.

But his words had no effect. She looked up, and though there were shadows around her dark eyes she smiled bravely. Sunlight streaming through the lobby window, brought out a blue sheen in her hair.

"I'm very tired," she said. "I'll think over what you said. Perhaps later."

The Rio Kid went back upstairs. Briefly he outlined a plan he had in mind to Celestino and Bill Knight, making no mention of the girl.

"Mebbe if yuh're out of town, Knight," he said grimly, "yuh'll be in less danger than yuh would be here. The gents who got Travers might try to get you."

Then he told about seeing the thin-faced man across the street, watching the hotel entrance.

"That sounds like Red Lampsell," Bill Knight snapped. "He was one of the gents on the Dixie Star."

Knight leaned against the wall, his hands shoved dejectedly in his pockets. Plainly he was miserable about the way the girl had acted.

"Talk to her," the Rio Kid advised. "I'm guessin' she's only actin'. She's really glad to see yuh."

Knight snorted. "She shore acted like it. Them folks in Frisco changed her. I was afraid they would. She can't see a plain cowhand like me no more."

The Rio Kid battles against the fiendish plans of Half-Face Brill, vicious bandit chief, in

COLORADO RIVER GOLD

By TOM CURRY

NEXT ISSUE'S EXCITING NOVEL

CHAPTER VI

"Stay Out of Town"

BOB PRYOR argued with Bill Knight, but the man stubbornly refused to make another attempt to speak to the girl. Celestino caught the Rio Kid's eye and shrugged.

The Rio Kid gathered up his new rifle and cartridges and they all trooped downstairs. Laurita Sandoval still sat in the big chair where the Rio Kid had left her. When she saw Bill Knight, she started to get up, then she sank back, her red lips pressed tightly together.

Bill Knight headed for the door like a man walking in his sleep. He didn't even glance at Laurita.

Going over to her, the Rio Kid tipped his hat.

"I'll be back soon," he said. "I'd like to palaver with yuh, ma'am."

She nodded, but she was staring at Bill Knight as he went out the door. When the Rio Kid joined Celestino and Knight on the boardwalk, Celestino was rolling a cigarette, a puzzled light in his eyes.

They walked down the crowded street to the livery. Bill Knight needed a horse. Celestino had spotted a buckskin for sale that looked like a good buy. As they moved along the Rio Kid tried to get some information out of Bill Knight about the girl. At last Knight shrugged and gave in.

"I always figgered Laurita was a thoroughbred," he said, "but she's changed. Like I told yuh, me and Tom Travers worked on old Miguel Sandoval's rancho in Sonora. Been there for five years. Laurita and me"—he reddened—"figgered on gettin' married. Then this Fortress of the Sun business started."

He told the Rio Kid that Laurita's Irish mother had died two years before. Then Rubio Cibola, half-mad descendant of one of Coronado's officers, had visited the rancho and wanted Laurita for his bride. Travers and Knight had spirited the girl away, brought her to Yuma and sent her to San Francisco by stage, to stay with an aunt. When Travers and Knight got back to the ranch, Miguel Sandoval had been kidnaped by Cibola.

"Me and Travers joined Cibola's army, gettin' branded with the Crosses of the Sun," Knight went on to explain. "He'd never seen us at the ranch, and he was hirin' gunslingers to work for high pay. We figgered

to get Sandoval out, but he was too well guarded. Travers left for help."

The Rio Kid's teeth were clenched as he thought of the cold-blooded murder of the ex-trooper.

"I reckon Gabe Reel was tryin' to kill Travers," he said. "The Law stepped in and to save his own neck Reel claimed it was Travers tryin' to gun him."

There was a bitter twist to Bill Knight's lips as they entered the livery stable.

"When Travers didn't come back," he said, "I escaped, got ashore and got a burro from a peon. I made it to Robertson's Landing and stowed away on the Dixie Star. Reel found me hidin'. I jumped overboard, and you know the rest."

There was a thoughtful light in the Rio Kid's blue eyes. He had made up his mind to see Laurita Sandoval again.

"I wouldn't hold too much against Laurita," he told Knight. "When we nail this Rubio Cibola, yuh can still get married."

Knight's cheeks went pale at mention of Cibola's name. "He's a devil!" he said, with an oath. "I'll laugh when I can put a gun at his belt and pull the trigger."

They bought the buckskin horse and a saddle for Knight, and got ready to ride out of town. They were to camp at a bend in the river. The Rio Kid remembered a good place to hide out that he had spotted that morning. Knight and Celestino would ride on ahead, and the Rio Kid would meet them that evening.

As Knight tightened the cinches on his saddle, the Rio Kid watched the redhead. He was as explosive as a firecracker. A good fighting man, but he had to be cinched down like that saddle.

"You figger Henry Bruner's in this?" the Rio Kid asked.

Knight shrugged. "I never seen him at Cibola's. Never seen Reel or Lampsell there either. But they must be tied up some way."

The Rio Kid nodded. He remembered what General Crook had said about not condemning a man until he had proof. But he had his own ideas about Henry Bruner.

As Knight and Celestino were about to ride off, the redhead suddenly turned in the saddle, and laid a hand on the Rio Kid's shoulder.

"I got a disposition like a mule," he admitted. "Mebbe I ought to see Laurita. Mebbe she's got some reason for the way she's actin'."

The Rio Kid shook his head. "You stay out of town," he warned. "There's gents would like to see yuh dead. I'll talk to Laurita."

CELESTINO and Knight rode off. The Rio Kid's eyes were narrowed as he strode down the boardwalk. He pictured Laurita Sandoval's lovely face, recalled those shadows under her eyes, and the set of her lips. He remembered the way she had looked when Bill Knight had walked out the hotel door.

"She's in love with that hombre," he muttered.

He went back to the River Hotel, determined to find out why the girl was acting so strangely. But Laurita Sandoval had gone out and had not said when she would return.

The sun was climbing higher into the molten sky, and the heat growing more intense. The fact that Laurita Sandoval had left the River Hotel in such heat worried the Kid. He set out to look for her.

As he walked down one of Yuma's busy streets, he was passing the post-office when he saw a towering familiar figure. His eyes lighted and he stepped into the crowded post-office.

"Milt Duffield!" he exclaimed. "Haven't laid eyes on yuh since the last time I was in Tucson."

A broad grin spread across Duffield's wide face. He was the mail inspector at Tucson, and a great friend of the Kid's.

"Captain Bob Pryor!" he roared, pumping the Kid's hand. He pulled the Rio Kid to one side, and talked for a moment about Tucson.

Then Pryor asked what had brought the mail inspector to Yuma.

A scowl darkened Duffield's face. "I'm out of my territory all right," he admitted. "But I'm headin' for the prison."

The Rio Kid tensed. "Who yuh goin' to see?"

"Feller named Tom Travers."

Pulling paper and tobacco from his pocket, the Rio Kid rolled a smoke. Then he drew Duffield further out of earshot of the others in the post-office, and lowered his voice.

"Tom Travers is dead," he said grimly. "Knifed in his cell."

Duffield's face went grave as the Rio Kid went on to tell of the brutal murder. When he had finished, Duffield slammed a big fist into his open palm.

Clem Lawrence Makes His Debut as an Outlaw Hunter—and Uses Plenty of Gun Savvy to Win His Spurs in MEN WITH WOUNDS, an Exciting Action Story by Johnston McCulley—Coming in the Next Issue!

"There's some danged funny things goin' on," he snapped. "And I had an idea Travers might give me a line on 'em. For one thing, Cochise is stirred up again. From what I gather, he seems to be shore he can lay Arizona waste, once and for all, and reclaim his lands."

The Rio Kid smoked in silence, watching Duffield's face. Then he shook his head.

"So yuh figger there's some tie-up between Cochise and the killin' of Tom Travers," he said bluntly.

Duffield nodded. He was a big man, six-feet-three in his stocking feet. Muscular, powerful, he was a striking figure. He was well-liked and had done a good job as mail inspector for Tucson.

He shoved back his wide-brimmed hat, glanced around to see that no one was listening.

"Captain Thomas Jeffords is the only white friend that Cochise has," he said to the Rio Kid then. "But I reckon yuh know that. Well, anyhow, Travers sent a letter to Jeffords. Mailed it from the prison. He told Jeffords to keep Cochise from goin' on the warpath at all costs. Jeffords is tied up with a Government freight contract, so turned the letter over to me. Jeffords will get busy soon's he comes back from a trip to Santa Fe."

Duffield fished a letter out of his shirt pocket, handed it to the Rio Kid who read in Travers' familiar handwriting:

Dear Jeffords: Keep Cochise on reservation. Don't let him get into Mexico. I'm expecting Captain Bob Pryor and he'll give you the details as soon as he talks to me.

Tom Travers.

"I got there too late," the Rio Kid said bitterly. "Somebody didn't want Travers to talk to me."

Milt Duffield scowled darkly as he shoved the letter back in his pocket.

"I figgered yuh'd be around Yuma," he said and suddenly his face lighted. "Say, mebbe you could do somethin' with Cochise. You and one of his braves run a hoss race out at the reservation one time when yuh was visitin' Jeffords. Cochise calls yuh a great warrior."

The Rio Kid shrugged. "All Cochise was interested in was buyin' Saber."

"Yeah, I remember," Duffield said, with a nod. "He calls Saber the Hoss-That-Runs-With-Wings."

AFTER a few more words with Milt Duffield, the Rio Kid left the post-office and headed up the street. He spent the rest of the afternoon trying to find Laurita Sandoval and also trying to get a line on Henry Bruner. But he didn't see the girl, and everyone he talked to seemed to be convinced that the cherubic little steamboat owner was legitimate.

He owned the Dixie Star and an ocean freighter called the San Pedro. The San Pedro loaded freight at San Francisco, then headed down the coast, around the tip of Baja California and up to the mouth of the Colorado at Robertson's Landing. There the cargo was shifted to the flat-bottomed river boat, Dixie Star, and brought to Yuma.

Long shadows were slanting across Yuma's main street when the Rio Kid headed for his rendezvous with General George Crook. The officer was waiting for him in the Yuma House, wearing his dress uniform. He was a dynamic figure, the kind of a fighting general a soldier would follow to the gates of Hades and back.

As they set off for Henry Bruner's warehouse the Rio Kid spoke of Tom Travers' death. The General's lips tightened.

"I wish I could go with you to Mexico, Captain Pryor. Losing a man like Travers makes me all the more sure that some dastardly plan is afoot. Milt Duffield was up to see me, too. He shares our views. Something big is in the wind."

The Rio Kid then told of his plan to honor Tom Travers. "He gave his life. I'd like to see him honored with a full military funeral, General Crook."

"He shall have it," the General promised, but as they walked along in the shadowy night, both sensed that death and treachery were afoot in Yuma.

[*Turn page*]

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

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A4e.

CHAPTER VII

Bushwhack Guns

HENRY BRUNER had living quarters in the rear of his rambling warehouse. The furniture was stiff, uncomfortable, and seemed out of place with the rough board walls. A lamp, with a fancy carved shade, burned on a shelf.

Bruner stood beside a carved table, a glass of wine in his hand.

There was a smile on his thick lips, a triumphant light in his pale eyes. He lifted the wine glass to Gabe Reel, who lounged against the wall.

"Success," he said in his twangy voice. He tossed off the wine, then rubbed pudgy hands together. "The Sandoval girl coming here is going to please Cibola."

A short laugh escaped Reel. His dark eyes glowed, and in the lamplight his high cheek-bones seemed more prominent, accenting his Indian blood.

"Cibola's smart," he admitted. "And he's shore got an eye for beauty. Soons the gal got his letter in Frisco, she come flyin'."

Bruner nodded. "She knew if she didn't come, her father would die." He paced up and down the room, hands clasped behind his back. Then he turned to Reel, cocking one eye. "She's safe on the Dixie Star. Nobody lays a hand on her, remember that. If Cibola wants to marry her, he will." He was staring out the window at the lights of a passing river boat. "I told Cibola I'd bring her and I'll do it. He'll trust us now."

Reel shoved bony hands deep in his pants pocket, stared back at Bruner.

"I'm gettin' tired of knucklin' down to Cibola," he announced flatly.

Bruner chuckled. "Think of the gold, my boy. Think of the gold."

But Reel did not share the steamboat owner's jovial manner. "What about the Rio Kid?" he asked. "Crook is sendin' him south. And he'll look in at the Fortress of the Sun."

A shadow crossed Bruner's face. He flicked the top of his wine glass with his finger-nail. Then he looked up at Reel.

"He's coming here with General Crook to dine," he said. "I have a plan."

"That Rio Kid can ruin everything," Reel snapped viciously. "And we've danged near got our hands on Cibola's gold."

Bruner looked annoyed at Reel's tone. "You allowed Bill Knight to escape," he reminded the half-breed. "Your man, Luke Grange, tried to kill the Rio Kid at the prison. That's made everyone suspicious. And if Grange had been caught, he might have talked."

Reel's beady black eyes were fixed on Bruner's cherubic face.

"Grange is hid out. He won't talk."

Bruner smiled and rubbed his hands. "Grange got two hundred in gold for killing Travers. He knows we pay off. Offer him two hundred more."

"Yuh don't want him hangin' around here," Real said abruptly.

Henry Bruner's pale eyes went cold and his lips twisted in a cruel line. He stared at Reel and the half-breed lowered his gaze.

"I said I have a plan," Bruner said softly. "I've got to get the Rio Kid out of this part of the territory, or kill him."

"I'd say we'll have to kill him," Reel snapped. "He's tough. Grange didn't have no luck tryin' to knife him. First time I ever knowed Grange to miss."

Bruner knew that the truth had been spoken. The coming of the Rio Kid had thrown his carefully laid plans awry.

"We'll try diplomacy first. I can't be too blunt, with General Crook here." He shrugged. "I reckon the Rio Kid will have to die. I've heard he's like a bulldog. He'll never give up."

Footsteps sounded on the long porch that ran along one side of the warehouse. Bruner took Reel by the arm, moved him toward a side door. He talked in a low voice, giving hasty last-minute instructions. Then Reel slipped out into the night.

Knuckles smacked against the front door. Bruner quickly covered the long windows, on the river side of the warehouse, with heavy drapes. Then he strode to the door to welcome General George Crook and the Rio Kid.

"Good evening," he smilingly greeted them. "It's a real pleasure, having you come."

THE General and Bob Pryor came into the long room. The air was heavy with the aroma of roast duck, and this reminded the Rio Kid that he was hungry. So many things had happened during the day that he had neglected to eat. But he was used to privations, for long days on the danger trails had hardened his body so that he could take anything that came along.

They sat at a long table, drank wine and exchanged gossip about cattle, mines and politics. Lighted candles were placed on the table by a solemn-faced Indian servant. General Crook and Bruner kept up a polite conversation, but the Rio Kid sat there stiffly, every nerve attuned to danger.

There was an air of unreality about that dinner and the Rio Kid knew that underneath the polite speech of Henry Bruner there was tension. They ate roast duck and fried potatoes. Bruner apologized for the food.

"It isn't much, but it's better than the tor-

tillas and frijoles you'll get in the San Pedro Valley, eh, Pryor?"

General Crook's eyes met those of the Rio Kid.

"I don't know that Captain Pryor is going to the San Pedro Valley, Mr. Bruner," the General said.

A short laugh escaped Bruner, he shrugged. "With Pryor as a scout, you'll have little trouble keeping the Apaches in line, General."

But General Crook didn't commit himself. "Pryor can always be counted on to give the best," he evaded.

The Rio Kid had to keep his eyes on his plate to keep a tight grin from showing. The General had cleverly evaded the issue, without telling Bruner a lie, or admitting that a dangerous mission was to be undertaken somewhere in the Gulf of Baja California.

As the meal progressed, the men became more and more silent. At its conclusion, Henry Bruner pushed back his chair, lighted a cigar, his pale eyes studying the clean-cut features of the Rio Kid. He seemed intent on making one more try for information.

"The Apache trouble is over in the San PedroValley," he said to the General. "That's a long way from here. How soon are you and the Rio Kid leaving?"

General Crook ran his fingers through his black beard, staring at Bruner, as if trying to gauge just how much he knew.

"I'm sorry to be disrespectful to my host," he finally said, with a trace of irony, "but my movements can be classed as a military secret."

Disappointment showed on Bruner's cherubic face. He looked across the heavy board table at the Rio Kid, and a crafty smile was on his lips.

"Being a gambling man, I'd wager you're going to try and find that fantastic place they call the Fortress of the Sun." He puffed on his cigar, staring through the cloud of gray smoke at the Rio Kid.

But Captain Bob Pryor was not one to be trapped so easily.

"I'm goin' to follow the orders of General Crook," he said pointedly.

A murderous light flashed into Henry Bruner's pale eyes. He got to his feet, trying to keep his voice level.

"Cigar smoke is getting thick," he said. "I'll open a window."

He pulled back the heavy drapes with an elaborate flourish, seeming to take longer than necessary as he fumbled with them. Through the open window they could hear the sounds of a river boat, the clatter of a passing wagon and the neigh of a horse.

Bruner stared out the window, then turned back to the table and sat down.

"This is great country, General," he said. "I hope that when my contracts with the Government expire, they'll be renewed."

General Crook smiled. "Why not, if you give the Government good service?"

GENERAL GEORGE CROOK

WHENEVER old-timers recall the days of the Indian Wars, the name of General George Crook is always among the first on their tongues. This fighting General was largely responsible for the final elimination of the Apache as a menace to progress.

Historians associate his name with that of the renegade chief, Geronimo, but General Crook was in the fight long before this last infamous redman wrote his bloody chapter in Arizona history. It was General Crook who was instrumental in subduing Cochise and bringing temporary peace to the territory a decade before Geronimo's outbreak.

A graduate of West Point, General Crook was one of the most colorful figures of Frontier days. A superb strategist, he was able to beat the Apache at his own game, pursuing him relentlessly until opposition was finally broken.

General Crook was born in Dayton, Ohio, September 8, 1828. He died in Chicago in 1890, after a long and eventful life.

Bruner puffed on his cigar. "I'm glad you've come to the Territory to take charge. Frankly, I've wondered how long I could keep up Government contracts with so many renegades in this part of the country. A strong military force under your leadership, General, and we will have nothing to fear."

General Crook thanked Bruner for the

compliment with a nod. He took out a silver watch, stared at it, then put it back in his pocket.

The Rio Kid was sitting tensely, a tingle of excitement running along his nerves. He watched Henry Bruner, who sat there puffing nervously on his cigar.

Ears strained for any foreign sound, the Rio Kid waited. He felt danger in the air. There were sounds from the river, music from an excursion boat, the laughter of a man and girl as they passed.

FEW men would have heard the next sound. But it carried to the Rio Kid's sensitive ears. Most of his life had been spent where Death was only a whisper, only a breath away. Now his trained ears caught the faint click of a gun coming to full cock.

The Rio Kid dived sideward, a shout of warning on his lips. The sweep of his long arm sent the candles at his end of the table crashing to the floor. A gun roared and the muzzle flame made a bright streak at the window.

Even as he was rolling over the floor, the Rio Kid was pulling at his own guns. He heard the plunk as the bullet from the skulker's gun dug into the heavy board table. General Crook was on his feet, yelling for the Rio Kid to watch himself.

Hardly had the gun flash died at the window than both the Rio Kid's weapons roared, but they did not drown out the hoarse scream outside the window.

"You got him, Pryor!" General Crook roared.

Henry Bruner had flung open the side door and disappeared into the night. Then the Rio Kid was on his feet. Just as he reached the door, he heard the blast of three quickly-fired shots.

Leaping out into the warm night air, the Rio Kid saw Henry Bruner standing over a huddled form on the ground, a smoking gun clutched in his hand. With General Crook at his heels, the Rio Kid moved toward Bruner, who turned to them.

"I got him, Pryor!" he announced. "Your shot winged him, but I finished him off. Tryin' to kill a man in my house!" There seemed to be genuine anger in his voice.

Men were running from town, their boots making a clatter on the boardwalk. A roustabout came up from the Dixie Star, carrying a lantern. Bruner grabbed the lantern, held it over the body on the ground. The Rio Kid looked down into the scarred dead face of Luke Grange, the murderer of Tom Travers. The man had been shot five times, any one of the bullets capable of snuffing out his life.

"That's the gent who tried to knife me at the prison," the Rio Kid announced.

Henry Bruner made clucking noises with his tongue, staring down at the dead man.

"I've seen him hanging around the river. Never knew his name."

General Crook laid a hand on the Rio Kid's shoulder. There was genuine concern in his voice.

"I'm mighty glad he missed, Captain Pryor."

The Rio Kid nodded, as he reloaded his guns. "It was close," he admitted, with a grim smile.

CHAPTER VIII

On the Trail

FOR several minutes, the Rio Kid searched the ground for sign. By this time the crowd had swelled until fifty men were ringed around the body. Then the Rio Kid shrugged and faced Bruner.

"Thanks for savin' my life," he said, staring hard at the steamboat owner.

But Bruner didn't lower his gaze. He nodded, cool and calm as ever. "We both got him, Pryor."

Then the General bade Bruner good night and he and the Rio Kid walked uptown. The stars were low in the purple sky, making a brilliant pattern in the heavens. It seemed peaceful here in the desert. It was hard to realize that death had almost claimed the Rio Kid.

"What do you think of Bruner now?" the General asked pointedly, when they reached the Yuma House.

The Rio Kid shrugged. "He's a tough 'un, General. But mebbe he wanted to kill Luke Grange to keep him from talkin' if anything went wrong."

General Crook ran fingers through his heavy beard.

"How soon are you leaving, Captain Pryor?"

"Soon's I get a saddle on Saber," the Rio Kid replied grimly.

General Crook extended his hand and the Rio Kid grasped it firmly. Their eyes met. The General's voice lowered.

"Take good care of yourself. Lives of many people are in your hands."

The Rio Kid had turned to go when Milt Duffield's big figure loomed up on the boardwalk. He yelled a greeting and came over, waving a letter which he passed to the General.

"Me bein' mail inspector comes in handy, General," he said. "This was addressed to you at Fort Apache. Just happened to see it when I was goin' through a mail sack. Figgered it might be important."

MILTON DUFFIELD

HERE was a man whose life was fully as colorful as that of any fiction character; a man who carved himself a well-deserved niche in Arizona history. Duffield was an imposing figure, according to those who knew him. Over six feet tall, he was broad-shouldered and powerful, a man with black hair and piercing eyes.

He came to the attention of President Abraham Lincoln during a riot in New York, when he championed a Negro who was about to be robbed. Duffield came West and settled around Tucson, where he was appointed mail inspector. He also served for a time as U. S. Marshal and helped bring justice to the wild Frontier.

Little is known of Duffield's earlier history, and his exact year of birth is not revealed in historical documents of the time. He came to an untimely end during the boom days of Tombstone, when he was shot and killed by a prospector during an argument over a mining claim.

The General excused himself while he read the letter. Duffield sensed that the General and Pryor had business to discuss so, with a wave of his hand, he disappeared up the dark street.

General Crook folded the letter, stuffed it in his pocket, and stared at the Rio Kid, a hard light in his eyes.

"I wrote Peters and Sons in San Francisco several weeks ago," he said ominously. "About guns and ammunition that were shipped to them by the Government during the war. I thought we could use the arms here in Arizona during the Indian trouble. The guns and ammunition were sold at auction a few months ago."

The Rio Kid tensed, staring back into the General's grave face.

"Who bought 'em?"

"Our friend, Henry Bruner. He's been loading them on the San Pedro. The guns leave San Francisco, but from all I can learn no guns have ever arrived here in Yuma."

The Rio Kid rubbed a hand over lips that had suddenly gone dry. The full import of the General's words smote him like a hammer. Thousands of guns and thousands of rounds of ammunition in the wrong hands could mean bloody destruction.

"You think the guns are bein' unloaded some place between here and San Francisco?" he asked.

The General nodded. "My guess is the Fortress of the Sun." He cleared his throat. "Good luck, Captain Pryor."

They shook hands gravely and the General went inside the hotel. And as for a moment more the Rio Kid stood there in the shadows, he knew he was embarking upon what might well be the most dangerous mission of his career.

Another try at the River Hotel and Cap-

tain Bob Pryor learned that Laurita Sandoval had checked in. He was deeply worried now, for plainly the girl had disappeared. He was bitter at himself for not having found out why she was in Yuma at all.

As he was turning away from the desk the clerk held out an envelope.

"You Bill Knight?" he asked.

The Rio Kid shook his head. "I ain't Knight, but I'm meetin' him soon."

With a shrug, the clerk tossed the envelope on the desk. "Miss Sandoval left this just before she checked out."

The Rio Kid stuck the letter in his pocket. He thanked the clerk, went outside and down to the livery stable. There he got Saber from his stall and threw on a saddle. The horse whinnied when Pryor climbed into the hull, and kicked up his heels to show his delight at once again hitting the trail.

The moon had climbed higher, and now threw its golden light over the flat-roofed buildings of Yuma. The Rio Kid felt his nerves tingle at the prospect of the adventure ahead. Even the furious cavalry charges in which he had participated under General Sheridan could not compare with this. For now he was on his own. The fate of many men and women lay in his hands. If the Territory of Arizona was threatened, as some seemed to believe, then it was up to him to find the source of the danger and eliminate it.

YUMA was dark, except where light from saloon doors cut a yellow swath across the dusty streets. The Rio Kid touched Saber lightly with his short cavalry spurs and rode down a side street. He was thinking of Laurita Sandoval's letter in his pocket. Where could she have gone?

He figured the best thing to do was to get Bill Knight, come back to town and try and find the girl. Knight would be able to move without endangering his life, now that the town was pitch-dark.

Passing Bruner's warehouse, the Rio Kid stayed in the shadows. When he reached the river bank, he halted Saber beside a board shack. Moonlight made a silver path on the rippling water. For several seconds he stared, then a tight smile touched his lips.

"Just as I thought," he muttered.

His eyes were on the boat moving out to midstream—the Dixie Star, with a single yellow light glowing from the wheel-house. The Rio Kid watched the flat-bottomed boat slip away into the darkness.

A man came along the river bank and the Rio Kid spoke to him, asked if he had seen Henry Bruner around. The man laughed, pointed at the river.

"Bruner and his whole crew just left," he said. "They pulled out like they was in an almighty hurry."

The Rio Kid thanked the man, then put Saber to a gallop, heading for the rendezvous with Celestino and Bill Knight. He found them a mile from town at a bend in the river beside a ruined adobe. Both had guns in their fists.

Then Celestino's laugh broke out as he recognized Saber.

"It ees my General," he said, with relief.

Dismounting, the Rio Kid trailed Saber's reins, then handed the redhead Laurita's letter. He had to grin as Knight snatched the letter, ripped open the envelope. Celestino struck a match so the note could be read.

Knight's face became drawn as he scanned the letter, then handed it to the Rio Kid. It said:

Dear Bill:

Cibola wrote me in San Francisco, saying he would kill my father if I did not return and marry him. I am to go to Cibola on a boat run by Henry Bruner. I love you very much, but I have to do this, as the blood of my father would always be on my hands.

Laurita.

An explosive oath burst from Bill Knight. He ran to the brush, hauled out his saddle and started cinching it on the buckskin.

"We got to stop her!" he shouted. "That dog, Cibola—"

The Rio Kid stepped quickly to his side, pulled him around. He looked at Knight's tense face, stared into his hot, angry eyes.

"The Dixie Star has already gone, Bill," he said, keeping a tight grip on Knight's muscular arms. "And Laurita's prob'ly on it."

Knight tried to pull loose, but the Rio Kid held him firmly.

"We're goin' to the Fortress of the Sun," he reminded the redhead. "That's when we'll settle with Cibola. We can't do nothin', buttin' our heads into a log wall."

Finally Knight calmed down, seeing the wisdom of the Rio Kid's words. There was no use in chasing the boat, for they could never hope to catch it.

Celestino's eyes were dark with concern.

"Thee lovely senorita, we save her from thees peeg, Cibola," he said, with an oath.

The Rio Kid nodded. To get Knight's mind off the girl, the Rio Kid related all that had taken place, telling of the dinner at Bruner's and the attempted bushwhacking.

"Bruner wanted to kill yuh," Bill Knight declared with conviction. "He don't want you headin' to the Fortress of the Sun."

They hit their saddles and headed south. As they left the clearing, Celestino leaned close to the Rio Kid.

"I am glad thee bushwacker, he miss," he said fervently.

They were traveling fast and light, not bothering with a pack-horse. The moon went down and the shadows deepened. The roll

of their horses' hoofs made a sound like thunder in the still night.

Bill Knight brooded in his saddle. Celestino sang snatches of a gay Border song.

EVEN though they moved at a fast clip, the Rio Kid was cautious and warned his companions to be on the look-out for an ambush. They avoided piles of rock and thick stands of willows. Henry Bruner might have gunmen lying in wait for them, knowing they would follow the river if they intended to head for the Fortress of the Sun as he surmised.

The Rio Kid kept Saber at his favorite ground-eating lope, but he had to rein down at times, for the mounts of Knight and Celestino could not keep up the pace. As they rode, the Rio Kid pondered the words of Milt Duffield. That there was some connection between the Apache chief, Cochise, and the Fortress of the Sun was now clear. If Cochise ever joined up with Rubio Cibola! The Rio Kid suddered at the thought.

Only Captain Thomas Jonathan Jeffords had the respect of the great Indian chief, but the Rio Kid was convinced that with General George Crook now in charge of the Armed Forces in Arizona, that peace could be worked out between the Indians and the whites. With Jeffords as mediator the plan was feasible.

But if Cochise, angered and embittered by what he termed bad treatment from the whites, should aline himself with renegades like Cibola and Bruner, there was no telling what the result might be.

CHAPTER IX

Indian Sign

DAY was breaking when the travelers halted their horses at the river bank and gave the sweaty mounts a chance to drink and nibble at the grass growing on the bank. Saber stuck his muzzle into the muddy water, then trotted up on a little knoll, standing there in the early morning sunlight as if carved from stone.

After hobbling the buckskin and the black, the Rio Kid and his companions rolled up on the warm sand and snatched a couple of hours' sleep before pushing on. They were grimly eager to reach their destination as soon as possible.

Another day and another night in the saddle found them skirting Robertson's Landing at the mouth of the Colorado. This was where the ocean steamers transferred their cargoes to the flat-bottomed river boats.

The Rio Kid pulled up Saber, stared across the flats toward the river mouth. The sun was warm and they could see two ocean freighters lying at anchor. Bill Knight and Celestino rode up beside Pryor, staring at the muddy waters shimmering in the sunlight.

They spotted the Dixie Star and rode toward it, hands near their guns. But when they arrived at the landing, the boat was deserted. From a roustabout watchman, they learned that Bruner and his crew had boarded a schooner and set sail down the Gulf. Yes, there had been a lady aboard.

Bill Knight swore savagely and the Rio Kid could understand his feelings. There had been a faint hope that they could corner Bruner and rescue the girl. But now that hope had been dashed.

They pushed on then, through the sand and cactus, toward the sinister Fortress of the Sun. Hours sped by, but finally Knight told the Rio Kid that they were almost at their destination.

"The Fortress is on a island," Knight explained. "We ought to be able to see it most any time now."

The Rio Kid nodded grimly. Their great adventure was about to begin. Even Celestino had sobered completely. No longer did he sing, and there was a tight set to his features.

The Rio Kid was conscious of a nervous tension so great that he must have transferred it to Saber, for the dun was quivering with excitement.

Knight was brooding, had been taciturn during most of the trip.

"If Cibola's harmed Laurita, I'll cut out his heart," he threatened again and again.

The Rio Kid studied the redhead, hunched over in the saddle of his trail-weary buckskin. The man was desperate with anxiety for the girl's safety.

The Kid thought of Laurita Sandoval with her dark eyes, her olive skin and shining hair. She was truly a thoroughbred, willing to sacrifice her own happiness that her father, Miguel Sandoval, might live. He didn't blame Knight for being in love with the girl. And he knew that she would play the game to the very end.

A mile further on, the Rio Kid suddenly held up his hand, bringing Knight and Celestino to a halt. That black stripe, running down Saber's back, was quivering, the sure sign that danger lay ahead. Pryor had come to rely upon this signal, for the horse had never been wrong. Some intuition helped him to sense any danger that threatened his rider.

They had come across a plain trail in the thick brush. Celestino and Knight were both staring at the sign. Celestino turned apprehensive eyes on the Rio Kid.

"Indian tracks, General," he said softly, and peered around at the walls of thick brush that rose on every side.

Bill Knight was studying the ground, impatient to get on.

"Prob'ly Seri Injuns," he said. "Plenty of 'em in this neck of the woods."

But the Rio Kid shook his head. He had spotted a piece of red cloth hanging from a bush, where it had caught on a thorny branch. He urged Saber forward, picked up the faded, dirty cloth and studied it. At once the memory of what Milt Duffield, the Tucson postal inspector, had told him in Yuma came to him. Celestino's eyes were also on the cloth. His young face was grave.

The Rio Kid let the faded cloth fall to the ground. His tanned face hardened as he and his companions moved cautiously forward.

"That was the head-band of an Apache brave," Pryor said, his voice barely above a whisper. "And that means Apaches are in this country."

Bill Knight looked skeptical. "There ain't never been Apaches around here that I ever heard of."

"Apaches are here now," the Rio Kid snapped, every nerve in his body alert because of this new danger. "My guess is that Cochise has come to smoke the pipe with Rubio Cibola."

THE Rio Kid and his companions doubled their vigilance now that they knew Apaches were in the vicinity. The sun became a great flaming ball, driving heat into their bodies, burning the moisture from their skins. Dust caked on their lips, but it was no time to stop to think of personal discomfort.

Bill Knight rode so hard it was difficult for the Rio Kid to hold him down. The redhead's face had become drawn and there were new lines around the corners of his mouth. Thoughts of Laurita Sandoval at the Fortress of the Sun were driving him to desperation.

Even Celestino, usually so light-hearted and smiling, was silent. He rode easily, his body movements blending with the rise and fall of his black. He watched the Rio Kid out of one eye, waiting for any kind of sign from his partner of the long trails.

But nothing happened. The day wore on and the Indian sign turned inland. The Rio Kid guessed that Cochise was making camp, waiting or some signal from Rubio Cibola that the pow-wow was about to start.

At sunset, the three riders came to a rise in the flat country, weaving their way through a forest of candelabra cactus. There before their eyes, shimmering with the gold of sunset, was the Gulf of Baja California. Until now they had purposely stayed clear of the coast as much as possible.

The Rio Kid sat his saddle, hipped over, one foot in the stirrup. It was an inspiring sight, that blood-red sky. And as he sat there, he wondered if it was a sign of bloody days to come.

Bill Knight urged his buckskin alongside the Rio Kid, a feverish light in his eyes. He pointed toward a dark blot of land a mile off shore.

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "The Fortress of the Sun!"

The Rio Kid felt a chill run up his backbone now that they were close to their goal. It was not because of fear, but something unexplainable, as if the very air were contaminated by the evil thoughts of Rubio Cibola and Henry Bruner. These two were men who valued human life less than they did the life of a Mexican burro.

The Rio Kid was remembering how Henry Bruner had ruthlessly shot down Luke Grange there beside the warehouse back in Yuma. Not that the Rio Kid had any love for Grange. But it showed to what extent Bruner would go. He would even slaughter his own men to gain his objective. That made him all the more dangerous.

They rode down a slant that led to the coast, careful to keep out of sight in the forest of cactus. There might be a look-out on the island, watching for strange riders.

Bill Knight stared anxiously ahead. "Cibola and his men are liable to be roamin' around," he warned. "They come off the island and raid them ranchos back in the hills."

But they saw no one. An hour later, Knight found a canoe that he and Tom Travers had cached before joining Cibola's army. It was hidden in a cove, far back from the water's edge, weighted with rocks and covered with brush. Now that they knew the canoe had not been touched, they turned inland once again.

The Rio Kid had been worried about what to do with their mounts. They couldn't take them to the island. He could turn Saber loose and the horse would be there when he returned. But the other two horses were not so well-trained. And quick exit from this part of the country might have to be made.

Bill Knight solved the problem. The peon from whom he had bought the burro, on his wild flight from the Fortress of the Sun, lived back from the coast.

"We can leave the hosses with him," Knight said. "This Manuel Guiterrez hates Cibola like poison, and he's a danged honest peon."

They moved off, following Knight's lead. Celestino brought up the rear, his dark eyes watchful, alert. The Rio Kid rode with one hand near his gun, a puzzled frown on his tanned forehead. He wondered why no attempt had been made to stop them before

COCHISE

THIS most famous of Apache chiefs was born about 1815 in the Chiricahua Mountains. Although he waged relentless war against the whites, Cochise always claimed his raids were made as a result of the broken promises of Indian officials. Some historians speak of him as cruel and bloodthirsty; others claim he had a sense of justice and fair dealing that was not found in many of his tribesmen.

Captain Thomas Jeffords, a former Mississippi River steamboat captain, was the only white man ever to venture to visit Cochise alone. Employed by the Government, Jeffords had a mail contract, carrying letters and freight between Fort Bowie and Tucson. In sixteen months twenty-two of his men were killed by Apaches.

Jeffords went alone into the mountains and held a pow-wow with Cochise. The Chief was so struck by this lone white man's bravery that he agreed to let Jeffords and his employees alone.

A strong friendship developed between Jeffords and the Chief. It was Jeffords who used his influence to get Cochise and his braves to come back to the reservation and settle down.

Cochise would agree only if Jeffords became Indian agent. At last Jeffords gave in to the Chief and headed the reservation. Peace came to Arizona for a while, but Cochise died soon after in 1872.

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they got this far south. Gunmen could have disembarked from the Dixie Star and set a trap. But the trip from Yuma had been uneventful.

When they rode up to Manuel Guiterrez' shack, he came out to meet them, straw hat bobbing, a warm smile on his leathery face at sight of Bill Knight.

"Buenos dias, senor," he greeted fervently. "You 'ave come back."

The Rio Kid and Celestino were introduced and at the Mexican's invitation, led their horses to a pole corral. Pryor liked this short, bandy-legged Mexican. Guiterrez had been working his field with a wooden plow, and his two sad-eyed burros stood in the shade. There was a neat patch of corn by the house.

GUITERREZ' wife was shy and stayed indoors, but they met her when Manuel invited them to share his humble supper. There was no chimney in the shack and smoke curled out the open door and win-

dow. Four ragged children huddled in a corner, staring at the strangers out of great round eyes.

They ate fried beans and tortillas and drank from the wine bottle Manuel took from behind a stack of goatskins in the corner. They talked in Spanish, and the Mexican's face lost its color when Cibola was mentioned.

Guiterrez crossed himself. "Diable, Senor Cibola, he ees thee devil. He no bother me, I am thee peon." He pointed to Bill Knight. "Bot Cibola make thee war on hidalgos, like thee good Miguel Sandoval." Plainly fear lay heavily upon the man.

As soon as it was dark, they were ready to leave. They left Saber and the other two horses in the corral. The Rio Kid told Manuel to keep the mounts out of sight as much as possible, and warned him of the Apaches.

"I don't think they'll bother you, though," he told the Mexican. "They're down here on mighty important business. But it don't hurt to keep yore eyes open."

"An don't forget that Cibola and his gunnies might be ridin'," Bill Knight put in.

Manuel Guiterrez got an old muzzle-loader from his shack, patted the barrel.

"Our great president, Juarez," he said, "has sent word to all peons. We are to fight when our freedom is threatened. I have not forgotten how to fight, senores." He patted the gun again.

And as the Rio Kid and his companions hiked through the shadows, he thought of Manuel Guiterrez and his wife and children, and how the man was not afraid in this wilderness, facing any odds with his old muzzle-loader. With such men, the new Republic of Mexico could not fail to make its place in the sun.

When they reached the shore, Bill Knight stood looking at the dark shape of Cibola's island, rising black and forbidding in the moonlight, a mile out in the Gulf.

"I wish Tom Travers was here," Knight said softly. "He'd give plenty for a chance to get even."

The Rio Kid nodded. "We're goin' to even things up for him, Knight."

General George Stoneman, John Wesley Powell and Al Sieber Are Among the Rio Kid's Pards in

COLORADO RIVER GOLD

NEXT ISSUE'S FRONTIER NOVEL

CHAPTER X

Fight for Life

STARS were bright points of flame in the sky as the Rio Kid and his two companions dug brush and rocks from the canoe. It was an Indian canoe, scooped out from a solid log. Bill Knight explained that he and Travers had obtained it from Guiterrez, caching it here for an emergency.

The Rio Kid was looking across those shining waters when the moon came up, flooding the countryside with silver light. He swore, for they would be fair targets in the moonlight, but there was no time to alter their plans. They had to move swiftly.

"We got to watch out," he warned his companions. "No tellin' what we'll run into."

With a muttered oath of impatience, Bill Knight lifted the prow of the canoe toward the water that rolled upon the sand.

"Let's get movin'," he snapped.

The Rio Kid stepped close to him, laid a hand on his shoulder.

"We got jobs to do. One of 'em is gettin' Laurita out of there. But we also got to put a crimp in Cibola's plans. I don't know how, but we're goin' to do it. We got to move slow. One wrong move and we're dead. So ride her easy."

Some of the tenseness seemed to go out of Knight's gaunt frame.

"You and Celestino can count on me," he said grimly.

The Mexican youth grinned at Pryor, as if everything were settled. But the Rio Kid was not so sure. Knight was impetuous, and might rush blindly into a situation without using his head. That could mean only disaster. And if they failed, the Rio Kid could see ranches laid waste and hardy pioneers shot down by the ruthless guns of Cibola's renegade army and Cochise's braves.

They launched the canoe, pushing it through the breakers. The tide was out and the waves were small. They had taken off their boots, rolled up their pants. There were only two paddles, so Knight and the Rio Kid took the job of propelling the heavy craft toward the island. The current was strong and they had to fight hard to keep the bow pointed toward the island. Celestino crouched amidships, eyes strained for any possible danger.

There was phosphorus in the water, and as their dripping paddles lifted at each stroke, silver flashed in the moonlight. The Rio Kid, plunging his paddle into the water, kept his

eyes on the island just ahead. There was no sign of the schooner which Bruner had taken down from Robertson's Landing. But it probably was at the other side of the island.

The evening before, when they had made camp, Bill Knight had drawn a sketch of the Fortress in the sand. The Rio Kid had studied that sketch a long time until he felt he knew as much as possible about the island without having been there.

Moonlight seemed brighter and the Rio Kid knew they were taking a desperate chance, crossing open water in the moonlight, but there was nothing else to do. It would be suicide to make the trip by daylight, and to wait for a dark night was out of the question.

Time was precious. With the Apaches nearby, every minute counted. If Cochise and Cibola ever got together, disaster would break loose in the Southwest. For Captain Bob Pryor was not forgetting the guns and ammunition that had been purchased by Henry Bruner.

They were a hundred yards from shore when a rifle slug cut into the water by the prow. Then, as if that were a signal, the whole bluff ahead seemed to erupt. There were orange flashes of muzzle flame, the crack of rifles. Bullets whipped the water, slammed into the canoe.

"Turn the canoe!" the Rio Kid shouted. "Back the way we come! Get out of range!"

Bill Knight was desperately trying to turn the canoe. The Rio Kid plunged his paddle into the silvery water, as another blast of lead ripped down on them. Celestino was trying to fire at those gun flashes, but the lead was wasted. The men firing on them were too far off for effective six-gun shooting.

Another salvo burst from the bluffs and the waters around the canoe began to churn. Slugs hit the canoe. Splinters flew into the Rio Kid's face. Any second he expected himself or one of his companions to be hit. But so far they had miraculously escaped.

Sweat poured down the Rio Kid's face, but in spite of the danger he was calm and could think clearly. They got the canoe turned, in the face of the bullets slammed down from the bluff.

Celestino fired again. "Queek, General!" he exclaimed. "Thee canoe!"

THE Rio Kid felt water around his legs. Muscles straining at the paddle, he tried to propel the unwieldly craft ahead. But it was filling with water. Rifle slugs had knocked holes in the sides. It would be only a matter of seconds until the canoe filled with water and capsized. There was no chance to plug the leaks, no chance to do anything, for the firing on the bluff was continuous.

"Shuck yore guns and swim for the island," the Rio Kid said calmly. "It's our only chance."

Bill Knight looked back at the Kid, a tight grin on his lips. Celestino was unbuckling his gun-belts. Then the canoe went under. The Rio Kid felt warm waters closing over his head as he fought loose from his heavy gun-belts. His lungs felt bursting as he clawed for the surface, the dim blast of guns coming faintly to his ears.

He came up for air, treading water. He saw Celestino floundering about five yards away, trying to keep afloat, and having a bad time of it. Another blast of rifle fire swept the waters, but the Rio Kid and Celestino had drifted away from the spot where the canoe went down.

"Hang on, Celestino—I'm comin'!" the Rio Kid shouted and struck out for the Mexican youth. He grabbed Celestino by the collar. "On your back," he sputtered. "Float! I'll tow yuh in."

The wind had come up and the water was choppy, throwing whitecaps in the Rio Kid's face. He tried to spot Bill Knight but there was no sign of the redhead. He called Knight's name, but there was no answer. Only an occasional rifle shot blasted from the island. The gunmen evidently had seen the canoe go down and believed all three men drowned.

Sick at heart over the disappearance of Bill Knight, the Rio Kid slowly towed Celestino toward shore. The Kid was a good swimmer, for on many of the campaigns during the War he had been stationed on the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. It had been great sport for the officers and men to swim for relaxation. And now, struggling in the choppy waters of the Gulf of Baja California, he breathed a prayer of thankfulness that he could swim.

The progress toward the shore was slow. Celestino floated, confident that the Rio Kid would bring him to safety. More than once this slim Mexican youth had put his life in the hands of Bob Pryor, and he had not put that trust in vain. But as they moved slowly toward the island, the Rio Kid knew their chances of getting out of this alive were slim. They had to keep on for the island, for the mainland was too far away for them to try to swim for it.

They had no weapons, nothing with which to fight the renegades of Rubio Cibola. Furthermore, chances of slipping onto the island without attracting attention were gone. Cibola's men would be ready for anything now.

But the Rio Kid did not give up. He had a fighting heart, and now in the black waters of the Gulf, he lashed against the current with his strong arms, gradually making progress toward the island shore.

As the firing ceased, the sudden quiet was ominous. By lifting his head, the Rio Kid could pick out objects on the shore. Huge rocks and the sentinel-like cactus on the

bluffs were silhouetted against the star-filled sky. But he saw something else that would have brought despair to a less stout-hearted man.

Lanterns bobbed on the shore, throwing yellow light against rocks and shadowy figures of men. Searching parties were out to see if anyone had managed to reach the island.

But even against overwhelming odds, the Rio Kid would not admit defeat. His fingers ached from clutching Celestino's shirt collar. He kicked his feet, left arm sweeping in powerful strokes. They moved by inches, but they moved.

The men with lanterns had moved up the beach. The Rio Kid could see their shadowy figures plainly now. The roar of the surf came to his ears and he knew he was not far from the island.

Gambling, the Kid headed for a spot where black rocks came down to the shore. He felt the surge of the sea and knew he was in the breakers. A wave broke over his head and he gasped for breath as it receded. His fingers slipped off Celestino's collar, but quickly he whipped over on his back, grabbed his partner before the youth went under.

Choking and battered, they were caught by a breaker and swept up onto the sandy beach. With his remaining strength, the Rio Kid hauled Celestino into a nest of waist-high boulders. There they both lay, panting and spitting water, not caring for the moment whether they were captured or not.

FINALLY the Rio Kid got his wind back. It had been a death struggle out there in the water, trying to keep Celestino afloat and swim for shore at the same time. Celestino sat up, touched the Kid on the shoulder.

"General," he whispered, "you 'ave saved my life once more."

The Rio Kid got up out of the sand, touched by the sincere note in Celestino's voice. But his face went hard when he heard the crunch of boot heels in the sand. He hissed a warning and both he and Celestino bent low as lantern light shot through the cracks in the nest of boulders.

Quickly the Rio Kid peered over a flat-topped boulder. His teeth clenched and a grim smile touched his lips. Two men were walking along the beach, their voices becoming plainer as they drew near.

"They never got to shore," one man said gruffly.

"Mebbe not," his companion said. "But we got orders to patrol the beach all night."

The men went on. The Rio Kid strained his ears. Nobody was following them. It was his guess that the guards had been paired off and were probably covering the whole island. This was the one chance for him and Celestino to get weapons, but it was a desperate chance.

Celestino stood up beside the Rio Kid, seeming to read his thoughts. The Mexican's dark hair was plastered to his head, his clothes clinging wetly to his slender body.

"We take them, no?" he whispered, pointing at the receding figures of the two guards.

The Rio Kid nodded grimly. "I'll take the one on the left. You take the other. Watch out for rocks. We ain't got no boots, remember."

Celestino grinned. The Rio Kid slapped him on the back and they went piling over the rocky wall. The wash of the breakers drowned out the sound of their footsteps. But at any second the Rio Kid expected to hear a shout behind them and feel the impact of a bullet in his back.

CHAPTER XI

Gil Tomaso

THE fight in the waters of the Gulf had taken much from the Rio Kid. As he sped along the sandy beach, he called on every ounce of reserve strength. Celestino was having a hard time keeping up, but the Rio Kid could not wait for him.

Ten feet from the two guards, Celestino tripped over a piece of driftwood and went sprawling in the sand. The two guards whirled.

There was no chance for the Rio Kid to duck for cover. Nothing to do but keep going. The two men were close together, the lantern between them. They saw that hurtling figure and hands flew to gun butts as they were shaken out of their momentary daze.

Then the Rio Kid was leaping. He slammed into the man with the lantern. Instantly there was the smash of glass as the lantern crashed on a rock. The guard grunted and went down, clawing for his gun.

Agile as an acrobat, the Rio Kid rolled over in the sand. He came to his feet, turned. The other guard was standing there, moonlight slanting on the barrel of his gun.

"It's the end," the Rio Kid thought.

But even in the face of that naked weapon, the Rio Kid knew but one code—fight until the end. He charged low as the guard fired. The hot breath of the slug made a hissing sound as it cut above the Rio Kid's bare head.

Then he was in close, lashing out with a hard fist before the man could swing his

gun for another shot. Knuckles crashed on bone. The man dropped to the sand without a sound.

The other guard was on his feet. He had held his fire for fear of hitting his companion. Now he had a clear shot. But as the Rio Kid waited for the slug, helpless to do anything, because of the distance between them something whipped through the air.

The guard sighed and slumped forward, to lie inert upon the sand. Then Celestino was running forward at a zig-zag gait.

"I hit heem with rock, General!" he panted. "Queeck—they come!"

He gestured wildly behind him. The Rio Kid saw bobbing lanterns and heard the sounds of running men. Other guards were coming up, attracted by the shot.

"The score's even," the Kid told Celestino. "Yuh saved my bacon by tossin' that rock."

Then the Rio Kid was bending over the man he had knocked out. He snatched up a gun from the man's left holster. Celestino got a weapon from the other fallen guard. The Rio Kid told Celestino to get the man's boots, and already he had himself slipped on a pair of expensive boots. They were too big, but would keep his feet from getting cut on the rocks.

Celestino quickly pulled on boots he took from the other guard. There was no time to get cartridges for the lanterns were bobbing closer. A man yelled a hoarse command. Guns opened up and bullets cut the air. But the Rio Kid and Celestino had put a protecting shoulder of rock between themselves and the oncoming men.

They ran low across the sand. When they came to a break in the cliffs, they scrambled up. The Rio Kid clutched his captured gun in his right hand, fingers of his left digging into the brush beside the steep trail. He heard Celestino coming behind him and a tight grin came to his lips. They had won out again. But there was no telling what they would find on top of the bluff.

The Rio Kid came over the lip of the bluff, turned and grabbed Celestino's hand, pulling him up beside him. They could hear the sounds of pursuit behind them. Swiftly the Rio Kid headed for a mound of rocks.

There were giant cacti everywhere. Sand was heavy underfoot. This was desert country, but there was the smell of fresh water in the air.

The Rio Kid realized that Cibola and his men could hold off practically any invading force. With fresh water and ammunition the island was impregnable.

Looking up, the Rio Kid saw a stone pyramid rising into the black sky, not a quarter of a mile away. Bill Knight had told him about that pyramid. It was at one end of the Fortress. There was something weird, sinister about that pile of stone, a grim momento of some forgotten race. Black clouds scudded across the sky, as if ancient gods were angry at the presence of white men within sight of their temple.

Here, then, was the Fortress of the Sun.

AS THE Rio Kid crouched there with Celestino, his thoughts went to Bill Knight. The last he had seen of the man was when the canoe went down. He remembered the redhead's desperate grin. He had been game to the last. A vision of Laurita Sandoval's lovely face came before the Rio Kid's eyes, and once more he vowed that he would get the girl out of here. He could do that much in memory of a gallant fighter, Bill Knight.

Celestino moved close to the Rio Kid, seemingly awed by the sight of that pyramid in the sky.

"What now, General?" he asked in a tense whisper. "Thee Senor Knight ees not here to show us the way."

The Rio Kid straightened. "We'll make our own way. Come on."

They could hear shouts from the beach, where the search was still on. The lord of this sinister island, Rubio Cibola, would not rest until the intruders were captured. Besides, Henry Bruner must have arrived at the island. Othewise gunmen would not have laid in wait to mow them down as they came across the waters in the canoe.

It was pure luck that the Rio Kid and Celestino had been able to escape with their lives. If the gunmen had waited until they were twenty feet from shore, there would have been no escape from the blasting guns.

"Somebody wins and somebody loses," the Rio Kid muttered as he led the way through the maze of giant cacti that loomed on all sides like bony sentinels.

As they made their way cautiously toward the pyramid, the Rio Kid tried to remember all Bill Knight had told him about the Fortress. He tried to picture the sketch Knight had made in the sand the night before, as they had hovered around their camp-fire.

As near as the Rio Kid could figure out, he and Celestino were approaching the main gate. According to Knight an eight-foot wall of adobe and stone surrounded the place. The main gate would obviously be the most heavily guarded spot, so the Rio Kid changed direction.

If Knight were only along, he could show them how to get inside. It had been the Rio Kid's plan to sneak over the wall; then try to figure out ways and means of eliminating Cibola's threat to Mexico and the Territory of Arizona.

But now Bill Knight was gone, a casualty in that sweeping blast of lead from the bluff. He must have been swallowed up in the waters of the Gulf. So now, above all else, the Rio Kid vowed that he would try and

rescue Laurita Sandoval and her father from the Fortress of the Sun.

He and Celestino halted in the deep shadows behind a boulder, as footsteps sounded in the sand. Two guards carrying carbines went by, a swinging lantern lighting their way. They were grumbling because they had to spend the night searching the island.

When they had passed, the Kid straightened, looked toward the pyramid to get his bearings. They were now at the edge of the cactus forest. The ground beyond was cleared and the Rio could see damp earth in the moonlight. There was the smell of freshly-plowed ground.

"Let's move," the Rio Kid whispered.

Celestino nodded and crept along in his wake, covering him. They had worked out a battle plan in their many fights. The Rio Kid always took the lead, while Celestino's job was to see that no one attacked them from the rear.

Moving carefully, they entered a field of corn, which shielded them from the eyes of prying guards. Ahead was a rough board shack, long and narrow. The Rio Kid cursed the bright moonlight. If the night had only been dark, their chances would have increased. But here they were on a small island, two men hoping to outwit the renegade army of Rubio Cibola. It seemed that the odds were too great, but this did not daunt the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles.

They crouched in the shadows thrown out by the board shack, listening. There was no sound from inside. Perhaps the place was deserted. At last the Kid's probing fingers found a door. He pushed inward, stepped through the opening, with Celestino at his heels. They closed the door behind them, stood there in the gloom, guns held at ready.

Nerves tingling with the ever-present threat of danger, the Rio Kid stiffened just inside the doorway. When Celestino started to whisper, Pryor laid a cautioning hand on his arm. Their eyes were becoming used to the darkness. And as the Rio Kid stared in front of him, he saw faces—a sea of faces, ghostly in the faint light that streamed through a window.

COCKING his gun, the Rio Kid pressed shoulder-blades against the wall, with Celestino at his side. Both were ready to empty their guns in one wild desperate bid for freedom if the men in the room made a move.

Now the Rio Kid could see that on both sides of the room were bunks, three high. Those faces belonged to men who crouched in the bunks, speechless, their eyes wide staring.

Finally a man stood up by one of the bunks and the Rio Kid could see his tall figure in the shadows. He was thin, emaciated, but his shoulders were square, his gaze level.

"Who are you?" he asked in perfect English, his whispering voice having only a hint of Spanish accent. "You are not the guard."

The Rio Kid heard Celestino grunt, unable to understand this. The Kid played his cards carefully, his eyes straining to see the speaker's face. "Cibola's men are after us," he said. "Yuh heard the shootin'?"

The tall man nodded. "We heard the shots." His voice still was only a hoarse whisper, but it told the Rio Kid that this man was an educated Mexican, no peon. "We are the slaves of Cibola," he said. "We have said prayers that you might escape."

"Madre de Dios!" Celestino exclaimed. "Free men are slaves!"

There was a low babble of excited voices in the long bunkhouse, but the tall man silenced it with a whispered warning.

Knowing he had nothing to lose, the Rio Kid plunged.

"A great American general sent us to spy on Cibola," he said in a whisper. "General Crook sent us to bust up Cibola's little game."

The tall man shook his head. "It is a noble gesture. But Cibola is the devil incarnate. It is a hopeless task, I am afraid."

A tight smile played over the Rio Kid's lips. He would test the loyalty of these men quickly.

"President Juarez has deserted yuh," he scoffed. "Slaves in Mexico!"

The gaunt man stepped forward and now the Rio Kid could see his face in the moonlight that slanted through the window. He was young, with stringy black hair that hung nearly to his shoulders. He wore cotton pants and shirt. Huraches were on his feet.

There was an angry note in his voice as he faced Pryor.

"You speak lightly of President Juarez, my friend," he snapped. "I am an officer in his army. I am Captain Gilberto Tomaso."

The Rio Kid stepped forward, extended his hand. "I just wanted to see which side of the fence yuh was on," he said. "I knew yuh was a fighting' man."

Tomaso shook hands with the Rio Kid, eyes running over the compact body, the grim jaw. True, the Rio Kid was not too presentable. His tunic was soggy, his pants streaked with dirt, but he was an upstanding man.

"I wish I could help," Tomaso said softly. "You are pitted against a madman. I also came to spy on Cibola. I was captured and made a slave."

A gray-haired Mexican sat up on a bunk, looking at the Rio Kid.

"Eef we were free, senor, we all geeve our lives to keel Cibola." The man's voice rose above a whisper. "He keel my wife—my baby!"

Tomaso whirled. "Quiet, Mendoza! The guards."

CHAPTER XII

Slaves of Cibola

OLD MENDOZA lowered his head, sobs shaking his body. The Rio Kid exchanged glances with Celestino in the faint light. Tomaso stood tense, his head cocked to one side, listening. But no sound came from outside. In the shack, only the heavy breathing of the men could be heard.

"How many of yuh are there?" the Rio Kid asked after a moment, when he was sure Mendoza's outbursts had not been heard.

"Perhaps a hundred," Tomaso replied. "There are more shacks, such as this."

That was what the Rio Kid had been waiting to hear. Perhaps this was the way out, the one chance to crush Cibola.

"Come on, all of yuh!" he urged Tomaso. "Join me and Celestino."

"But, senor—"Tomaso protested.

The Rio Kid was not to be stopped. "Come with us now! You know the way into the walls. We can get guns, arm these men. They'll have a chance to fight for their freedom!"

Gil Tomaso stiffened, then relaxed with a shrug of his bony shoulders. He stuck out his right foot, and a chain rattled.

"Senor, we are chained like dogs. Only when the guards come to make us work in the fields are we unlocked."

A wave of blind fury swept over the Rio Kid as he saw the heavy iron ring on Tomaso's ankle and saw the long black chain that was bolted to the floor.

"I am allowed to move about," Tomaso explained. "I am in charge of this bunkhouse. I, Captain Gil Tomaso, have been made captain of slaves." He waved a hand at the bunks. "The others are chained to their bunks."

Celestino growled an oath. Here were slaves! These men were serfs, men with no hope of freedom. It didn't seem believable that in this Western land there could be such a thing. The Rio Kid had just finished four long years of fighting to free slaves in his own land. Now he had come upon a more horrible type of slavery than any he had ever encountered.

A thin, dried-up little man, with the high cheek-bones of a half-breed, sat his bunk staring at the Rio Kid, a strange glitter in his dark eyes. Tomaso caught the man's glance, saw the smile on his lips.

"Why do you grin, Zopotoc?" Tomaso demanded. "None of your sly tricks or I'll slit your throat."

Zopotoc lifted his hands, the grin gone from his loose lips.

"Senor Tomaso, I only smile to theenk how good she be to be free," he whispered hoarsely.

Gil Tomaso turned to the Rio Kid, gesturing toward the door.

"Best you go, senor. If the guards—"

Heavy boots sounded outside and there was a mumble of harsh voices. Gray-haired Mendoza stiffened on his bunk.

"Thee guards!" he whispered. "They come!"

The Rio Kid and Celestino whirled to the door. But already they could see lantern light and the shadowy forms of men bearing down upon the shack.

Tomaso was at the window, staring outside.

"It's von Pragar," he growled. "Quick—under the bunks!"

Tomaso hobbled to his own bunk, the chain dragging across the floor. He lay down, beckoned the Rio Kid to crawl under the bunk. The Rio Kid scrambled underneath, with Celestino at his side.

"Better to die," Tomaso mumbled, "than not to try for freedom."

He dropped a corner of a blanket from his bunk, so that it hung nearly to the floor. This would screen the Rio Kid and Celestino. But the Kid could see the door through a crack where the blanket did not meet the supports of the bunk in front.

The door opened and men stamped inside, their boots pounding the hard-packed floor. From where he lay in the corner, the Rio Kid could see a squat, long-armed man with a harsh, brutal face. He wore a black uniform with brass buttons and gold epaulets on his shoulders. A heavy sword hung from a black belt and there was a gun in his hand. He wore no hat and his short-cropped hair looked like dirty yellow bristles.

He stared at Tomaso's bunk. "You, Tomaso!" he commanded. "Any strangers about?" His guttural voice reminded the Rio Kid of the snorts of a rooting hog.

Tomaso stirred in the bunk. "I have seen no one."

The man at the door snarled, lifted his gun. "Say 'sir', you dog! I am Colonel von Pragar. And you,"—he smiled, with a vicious twist to his lips—"are Captain Gilberto Tomaso, late of the ragtag army of Juarez." His lips curled. "On your feet!"

Tomaso got out of the bunk and stood erect in the center of the floor. With his gun in his fist, the Rio Kid waited. He would have the satisfaction of killing von Pragar if it came to a show-down.

VON PRAGAR tapped his revolver muzzle on the blunt fingertips of his left hand. He stared at Tomaso, his eyes yellow

as a puma's in the lamplight.

"If you see strangers and they are not reported, you die!" von Pragar snarled. "Even as the red-headed pig of a traitor, Bill Knight, is going to die."

Lying huddled in the far corner beneath Tomaso's bunk, the Rio Kid felt a shock go through his body. Celestino drew in a hard breath. Bill Knight was not dead! He was a prisoner in the Fortress of the Sun!

The realization that Knight still lived brought a surge of emotion sweeping through the Rio Kid. Even though the man was doomed to die, according to von Pragar, there was still a chance that he could be saved.

Von Pragar was still standing there by the door, a contemptuous smile on his brutal face.

"When I've broken you, Captain, you also will die," he snarled. "Ach, it will be good to watch."

Gil Tomaso's body grew taut, as if the Prussian had slapped him. The men who stood on either side of the door were grinning. They were a hard-eyed lot. Each man wore a brown sombrero, a brown shirt. Over the heart of each man was the insignia of Cibola's army—Las Cruces del Sol, Crosses of the Sun, woven into the cloth with brown thread. And the Rio Kid knew that each of these cutthroats was branded on the chest, even as Bill Knight and Tom Travers had been.

At last, as if satisfied that Tomaso had seen no strangers, von Pragar turned on his heel. His men trooped outside, but at the doorway, von Pragar turned, staring at Tomaso.

"Tomorrow you rise an hour earlier," he ordered. "It is Rubio Cibola's wedding day."

Then he slammed the door shut and the Rio Kid could hear the heavy tread of boots as the men moved away from the shack. The Rio Kid and Celestino came cautiously from their hiding place. There was no sound outside now. Tomaso sat down on the bunk, his mouth a bitter line across his pale face.

"Better stay," Tomaso cautioned. "Von Pragar is a dog. He might come back."

And so the Rio Kid and Celestino crouched there in the gloomy shack with the chained slaves of Rubio Cibola.

"Bill Knight, he ees alive," the Mexican youth muttered to the Kid. "What we do now?"

But the Rio Kid only stared at the door where von Pragar had been but a few moments before. At last he spoke.

"Cibola's killin' Knight and marryin' Laurita Sandoval tomorrow. We got to work fast."

For minutes more the Rio Kid and Celestino waited, listening for any sounds that might announce the return of von Pragar and his guards. He asked Tomaso about the colonel and learned that he had come to Mexico with Maximilian. He was a Prussian army officer. When Maximilian's throne had tottered, Cibola had got in touch with Von Pragar and brought him to the Fortress of the Sun to whip a renegade army into shape. According to Tomaso, the German had done a good job.

At last the Rio Kid was satisfied that it was safe to leave the shack. He turned to Tomaso, his face hard, eyes flinty in the moonlight.

"Bill Knight is our pard," he announced in a low voice. "He's a prisoner. Where would Cibola be keepin' him?"

Tomaso shrugged bony shoulders. "Beneath Cibola's adobe house, there is a dungeon. Your friend is there, no doubt. But you can never rescue him."

But the Rio Kid only grinned tightly. He got Tomaso to talking in a low voice, about how he had come to the Fortress of the Sun. As Tomaso talked, the hatred he felt for Cibola and his men, was in his voice.

"President Juarez had faith in me," he said. "I was to learn Cibola's plans. But I was captured. It is only a matter of time until I die. And I die without helping the cause of freedom in Mexico."

Desperately the Rio Kid was trying to think of some means by which he could affect entrance to the Fortress.

"Von Pragar said yuh had to get up an hour early," he said to Tomaso. "Where will yuh be?"

Tomaso rubbed a hand over his jaw. "We have to bring in firewood. There is to be a feast for Cibola's wedding day." Then suddenly the young Mexican officer grinned. "I have it. The carts."

THE Rio Kid's face lighted. The cause of freedom in this new Republic was not lost as long as there were resourceful young officers such as Captain Gil Tomaso. They made their plans, and Zopotoc, the half-breed, listened, his beady eyes glittering.

"Remember, by the Buzzard Rock," Tomaso warned in a low voice as the Rio Kid and Celestino turned to the door.

"I don't know how we'll do it, but we'll get yuh free," the Rio Kid promised. "Be ready to strike."

Gray-haired old Mendoza looked up at this steely-eyed fighting man and confidence came to his face. But Zopotoc, the breed, only smiled craftily.

"Vaya con Dios," Mendoza muttered. "Go with God."

Then the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles slipped out into the night. They hugged the shadows of the board shack until they were sure no guards were about. Then they ran through the cornfield and reached the rocky hills.

It seemed that the search had been called off until daylight, for none of Cibola's men

were about when the Rio Kid and Celestino, using Tomaso's directions, finally reached Buzzard Rock. Piles of mesquite and greasewood had been cut and stacked beside two high-wheeled carts. Both were loaded with wood.

"Let's get busy," the Rio Kid snapped in a low voice.

Celestino grinned and helped Pryor toss out some of the wood from the nearest cart. This was the one Tomaso had suggested for a hiding place. Then they burrowed down in the cart, pulled wood over their heads and waited.

CHAPTER XIII

Rubio Cibola

WHEN the first streaks of gray dawn touched the eastern sky, guards appeared at the shack that housed Tomaso and the other slaves. They were unchained, marched outside. And it was then that Zopotoc, the breed, whispered to one of the guards. He was quickly marched away, but Tomaso and the others did not see this. They were heading for Buzzard Rock to bring in the wood that would start the fires in the great court-yard inside the Fortress.

Zopotoc was taken to Colonel von Pragar, who stood by the main gate, his round, arrogant face cold and ruthless. Zopotoc bowed low, his cunning little eyes lighted with greed.

"I win my freedom and five pieces of gold," Zopotoc said. "The great Cibola promised this to all slaves who listen to the whisperings of the wind." He spoke in Spanish.

Von Pragar's face did not change expression. He leaned against the stone wall beside the big gate.

"Ach, speak up," he snarled. "You get your reward. What news have you?"

Zopotoc grinned, bowed again. "Two strangers hide in wood cart."

Von Pragar's yellow eyes narrowed. He turned to look up the dusty road that led to the gate. A wood cart was approaching, drawn by two sleepy-eyed burros. Guards walked in the rear of the wagon. Then came Tomaso and the slaves.

When Tomaso saw Zopotoc standing beside von Pragar, his face went white. But Zopotoc was holding out his hand.

"The gold, master."

Von Pragar's lips peeled back from broken teeth. He drew his sword, hurled it with an underhand motion. The heavy blade was buried in the breed's chest. The treacherous Zopotoc fell to the ground, eyes rolled back in his head. He tried to pull out the blade, quivered, then lay still.

"Charge the wagon!" von Pragar ordered his men. Then stepping forward, he pulled the sword from Zopotoc's body. "You got your reward, you swine."

Brown-shirted soldiers rushed toward the wagon, carbines leveled. Von Pragar wiped the blade of his sword, then sheathed it.

At sight of the rushing soldiers, the two burros became frightened. From his crouching position in the cart the Rio Kid, gun clutched in his right hand, watched the oncoming soldiers.

"We got to make a break for it," he whispered.

Celestino nodded grimly. Both got ready to toss aside the wood that partially covered them, and go down fighting.

At that moment, the burros broke into a run. The high-wheeled cart bounced over the ruts. Soldiers yelled. Guns hammered and slugs ripped into the wagon. The Rio Kid was pawing aside the short lengths of wood. He swung up his gun and fired. One of Cibola's brown-shirted renegades pitched forward with a scream.

"Jump!" the Rio Kid yelled at Celestino.

The cart was gaining speed, the burros running wildly, their ears laid back. Just as the Rio Kid and Celestino prepared to leap, one wheel struck the stone wall. The cart lifted crazily, tipped at a sharp angle. For a moment it seemed it would right itself, then the wheel struck again, splintered and the cart went over.

The Rio Kid pinwheeled through the air in a shower of wood. He hit the ground heavily. Lights blasted in his head as he tried to get up. He saw Celestino rolling over on the ground. Beyond was the cart and the burros in a welter of splintered wood and harness.

Before he could bring up his gun, the Rio Kid was smashed back into the road as two soldiers fell on him. Dazed, shaken, he was hauled to his feet by two scowling renegades. His gun had fallen under the impact of those bodies. Celestino was brought up under guard, then the two were marched toward the main gate.

Their plans had failed, the Rio Kid thought bitterly. He stole a glance at Celestino, and saw that the Mexican youth was composed, even in the face of defeat. And he smiled grimly.

Von Pragar stood by the gate, hands clasped behind him, his yellow eyes flicking over the faces of the two prisoners like a whip. Henry Bruner stood at his side, a sea captain's faded cap slanted over one eye. His cherubic face was wreathed in smiles, as he saw the Rio Kid and Celestino.

"We meet again, eh, Pryor?" he chortled.

Gabe Reel stood at Bruner's side, his dark

eyes lighted with secret amusement. Thin-faced "Red" Lampsell lounged against the stone wall, one hand on his gun.

Scorn for Henry Bruner showed on the Rio Kid's tanned face. His lips were thinned, his blue eyes showing their hatred. Celestino, at his side, was grimly silent. Guards ordered them to halt at the gate.

BRUNER looked away from the Rio Kid's hot gaze, turned to von Pragar. He pointed at the body of Zopotoc, lying in the dust.

"If you hadn't been so handy with that sword, we might have learned more," he said bitingly.

A flush crawled over von Pragar's brutal features. He glared at Bruner.

"I run the army. Ach, you Americans!"

A tight smile was etched on the Rio Kid's lips. He nodded at Bruner.

"He's no American. He's sold out his own country."

But Bruner only shrugged and smiled.

"Any man would do as much for gold."

"Gold won't do yuh no good where yuh're goin'," the Rio Kid retorted.

Celestino grinned, but the Rio Kid was not amused. He looked beyond Bruner, to where Tomaso and the other slaves stood by the stone wall. Tomaso's face was hard as von Pragar turned to him.

"You—did you help these men?" He pointed at the Rio Kid and Celestino. The Prussian's voice shook with anger, for Bruner's words had filled him with fury.

Tomaso stepped away from the wall.

"The cart was loaded last night, sir."

Von Pragar half drew his sword. He glared at Tomaso, then turned to one of the brown-shirted soldiers who had accompanied the cart. The soldier verified Tomaso's statement.

"Nobody got in the cart while we was there," the soldier answered. "Them gents must've been hidin' in it all night."

Von Pragar rubbed his jaw, stared at the body of Zopotoc, then turned as Henry Bruner touched him on the shoulder.

"I'll take the prisoners to Cibola, Colonel." There was a smile on his pudgy lips.

Von Pragar drew himself up and it seemed that he would burst with rage, at Bruner's insolent tone. Then he snapped an order at two soldiers and the Rio Kid and Celestino were hustled inside the walls of the Fortress of the Sun.

The sun came out of the east with a burst of color and heat, sweeping its brilliant light over the court-yard. With a carbine muzzle jabbing him in the back, the Rio Kid walked across the yard, head held high, a defiant light in his eyes. Celestino walked by his side, with a proud lift to his chin.

The Rio Kid stared at the adobe buildings that lined the heavy wall. They had thick walls and red-tiled roofs. Narrow windows were barred. Here and there were great stone idols, some of them broken, others tipped at odd angles, as the earth had settled beneath their weight. Some early Spaniard had built the Fortress of the Sun in the midst of an ancient sun temple.

The court-yard was hard-packed. The Rio Kid saw large barbecue pits and saw slaves getting things ready for the wedding feast. Everywhere were slaves with that iron band around their right ankles.

Half a hundred of Cibola's armed men, a hard-faced lot, were lined up inside the court-yard. They wore bandoleers over their brown shirts. Two swarthy breeds in gold-braided coats and fancy trousers were passing down the line. These were evidently officers. They carried side-arms and sported brown caps. One of them carried a buckskin bag, the other was passing out shiny gold pieces to the men.

Henry Bruner looked at the Rio Kid, and pointed at the bag of gold.

"Good soldiers get paid every morning," he said, with a grin. "These men will do a lot for gold. Your friends'll be seein' 'em north of the Border one of these days."

The Rio Kid muttered an oath under his breath. Hatred was mirrored in his blue eyes, for to him a man who would sell out his own people was worse than any Border renegade.

Sunlight touched the stone pyramid ahead, bathing it in a ghostly light. The Rio Kid lowered his eyes from the pyramid that rose into the sky. At the foot of the pile of stone was a rambling adobe. Two guards stood at attention on either side of a huge oak door.

Bruner led the way to the door, shoved it open. Gabe Reel drew his gun then and ushered Pryor and Celestino inside the building. Red Lampsell and the two guards who had brought them across the court-yard stayed outside.

The heavy door slammed shut and Reel prodded the prisoners across a heavy carpet. Even though it was daylight outside, the interior of this long room was dim. Candles burned on a mantle above a huge fireplace, giving the room its only light.

BEYOND a long table stood a tall, thin man dressed in velvet jacket and tight-fitting pants, stitched up the sides with gold braid. The Rio Kid did not have to be told that this was Rubio Cibola. The man was hawk-nosed, with black merciless eyes and a thin slit of a mouth. He watched the prisoners approach, a cruel smile on his lips.

Bruner snapped an order and the Rio Kid and Celestino halted at one end of the long table. Gabe Reel, drawn gun in hand, stood behind them.

Bruner walked to Cibola's side and faced the prisoners.

"This is the Rio Kid and his side-kick," Bruner said, amusement in his voice. "I told you they were coming here. We got 'em even if your von Pragar did mess things up by not killing them in the water."

Cibola lifted an eyebrow, glanced at Bruner, then looked at the Rio Kid.

"So you are the Captain Pryor I've heard so much about. Welcome to the Fortress of the Sun." He bowed, a mocking light in his eyes. "I hope your short stay will be comfortable."

The Rio Kid eyed this man who dreamed of conquest, and no emotion showed on the ex-cavalry officer's tanned face as he studied Cibola. The man was dark and he toyed with a waxed mustache on his upper lip. His features were coarse and there was nothing to indicate that he was pure-bred Spanish. He reminded the Kid of a renegade he had met some years before, a man who had been a mixture of French, Spanish and Indian. And the Rio Kid would have been willing to bet that the same conglomeration of blood flowed through Cibola's veins.

Standing with his shoulders back, his fighting jaw set at an aggressive angle, the Rio Kid took in the furnishing of the huge room. Here was a queer mixture of Indian and Spanish art. There were high-peaked polished helmets hanging on the walls, along with plumed lances and heavy swords, relics of a bygone year. Heavy velvet drapes, bearing the crest of Spanish royal families hung from the ceiling. The faint candlelight brought out the gold thread in the tapestries.

Indian rugs were on the floor. Stone idols were ranged along the far wall, horrible grins of derision carved on their faces.

This place, the Rio Kid decided, was enough to give a man the shakes. It was weird, uncanny.

CHAPTER XIV

Gold!

NO LONGER the smiling steamboat owner, Henry Bruner was tense, standing there beside Cibola. The strain was beginning to show on his cherubic face, putting pouches under his colorless eyes and etching lines about his mouth.

He pointed a finger at the Rio Kid and Celestino.

"It's the firing squad for them!" He came striding across the room, his lips curled. He glared at the Rio Kid. "I should have finished you in Yuma."

His hand lashed out, the flat of his knuckles striking Pryor on the cheek. Blood rushed to the Rio Kid's face, but he did not wince, did not even blink his eyes. He stared at Henry Bruner, a smile of contempt on his lips.

"You dirty traitor!" he accused.

Gabe Reel jabbed his gun muzzle hard into the Rio Kid's back, the click of the cocked gun sounding loud in the room. Then Cibola moved around the end of the table his black eyes swinging from Bruner to Reel.

"That is enough!" he snapped. "I, Rubio Cibola, give the orders here!"

There was a quick exchange of glances between Bruner and Reel. Then Bruner bit his lip, making an effort to control the anger that made his pudgy body shake. He stepped back, clenching his fists.

Sunlight was beginning to slant through the narrow barred windows, falling on the thick carpets and heavy furniture. Cibola came forward, faced the Rio Kid.

"All men who fight Cibola die," he announced proudly. "Tom Travers defied me—now he is dead. His amigo, the Senor Knight, awaits execution. Then there is Gil Tomaso, Captain Tomaso." He laughed. "When I finish with him, he dies. First he tastes the slave whip."

"What you goin' do with these two?" Bruner demanded.

Cibola smiled cruelly. "Ah, they shall have my special attention. They shall die, staked out on top of the Pyramid to the Sun, like the scout, Jeb Miller, who was also sent to spy on me by General George Crook." He spat out the last as if it were bitter on his tongue.

The Rio Kid stiffened, and Celestino's jaw tightened. So that was what had happened to Jeb Miller! Left to die on the Pyramid to the Sun! And right then, the Rio Kid vowed that somehow he must avenge the scout, for he had known Miller well. There were many scores to settle with Cibola. But the odds against them ever being settled were great.

Henry Bruner lighted a cheroot, puffed on it nervously.

"Pryor knows General Crook's plans," he told Cibola. "Torture him and we'll get the truth. It'll help if we can find out how much the military authorities know."

A thin flush of color spread across Cibola's bony face and the glance he threw at Bruner was cold and murderous.

"If you had not bungled, the Army would know nothing."

Bruner's eyes narrowed. "I've played my part. You've got the guns and ammunition like I promised."

Then Cibola shrugged. "You are right. We are partners. I forgot." But that gleam in his black eyes was still there as he spoke.

"I will have the greatest army in the West, before I am through."

The Rio Kid caught Celestino's sharp glance. Both knew what Cibola meant. The Kid glared at Cibola.

"Yuh've got Cochise and his Apaches," he snapped. "Yuh're plannin' wholesale murder."

Cibola raised his thin black brows, a surprised look on his face. Then he smiled.

"So you do know my plans. You are a smart rooster, my amigo."

There was an explosive oath from Bruner. "This Rio Kid knows plenty. I say torture him and get the truth!"

Cibola's face hardened and a fanatical light sprang into his dark eyes.

"You say!" he shouted. "I am lord of Cibola Island. It is I who give the orders. I, who am soon to rule the western half of Mexico. And, the gods granting, the lands beyond the Border that are mine." He frowned at the Rio Kid. "My ancestors were granted the lands your people claim as your own. And I will drive out you American pigs!"

The man was shaking when he finished speaking. A thin film of sweat showed on his dark brow. He walked to a small table where a decanter of wine sparkled in the warm sunlight. He poured a glass of the amber liquid, tossed it down in a single gulp, then his black eyes centered on the Rio Kid.

"You think I'm mad, perhaps. William Walker laid seige to the city of Granada and captured it. But he made mistakes. I won't make those mistakes."

FROM the red sash, wrapped tightly around his waist, Cibola took a gold key, tapped it lightly against his finger-tips. He had control of himself now and that cruel smile returned to his lips.

"Before you die," he said, "I want to show you my power—the only power in the world."

He clapped his hands, looking at Bruner, an amused smile on his lips. Two hard-faced soldiers popped into the room, in answer to Cibola's signal. They stepped forward briskly, polished carbines in their hands, halted.

At sight of the golden key in Cibola's hand, a greedy light came to Henry Bruner's eyes. Reel bent forward to look at that key and his high cheek-bones flamed with color.

Cibola stepped to the wall, pulled aside a tapestry and touched a hidden spring. A section of the wall opened.

Celestino's young face was grave, as he looked at the Rio Kid.

"Where we go now, General?" he whispered.

With a shrug, the Rio Kid stepped through the narrow opening in the wall, followed Cibola down a narrow flight of stone steps. Gabe Reel held his gun against the Kid's spine. Henry Bruner and Celestino were behind Reel, the soldiers bringing up the rear.

The smell of damp earth came to their nostrils. The Rio Kid thought of Bill Knight, a prisoner down here underground somewhere. His heart began to pound. If there was only some way of rescuing Knight! He ran his hand over the stone walls, as he went down the steps. They were wet and slimy. Chances were the adobe house had been built on the site of a ruined temple.

The passage twisted down and the Rio Kid had to feel his way along. He wished for a gun. One bullet in Rubio Cibola and the job would be done. One bullet—one man. For now he knew that Cibola was touched with madness. He might never succeed in his bold plan, but innocent men, women and children would die before he could be stopped.

As they moved down, faint light glowed ahead. They turned a corner in the passage. It was wider here and the ground was level. A sputtering lamp, bolted to the wall, showed a heavy wooden door, bound with strips of iron. Two guards were on either side of the door.

Cibola looked around, a mocking light in his eyes. Then he inserted the key in the lock. The door swung wide. He stepped back, waved his hand at the opening.

"This is power," he said to the Rio Kid. "Power to buy anything I want. Power to fulfill my dreams."

The Rio Kid and Celestino looked in through the open doorway. A whistle of surprise escaped Celestino's lips. But the Rio Kid stood still, his eyes on a stack of yellow gold bricks. And he knew that Cibola's boasting had not been without foundation. With that much gold he could buy men, could buy Apache braves, and set himself up as a ruler over freedom-loving people.

There was dead silence there in the narrow passageway. The Rio Kid saw Henry Bruner staring at that pile of gold, his face a sickly yellow in the lamplight. Gabe Reel's dark face was expressionless, but his lips, beneath that heavy black mustache, were pressed tight together.

Celestino looked at the Rio Kid and shook his head dazedly, as if unable to understand so much gold being in one place. The Rio Kid smiled grimly at his partner's consternation.

Rubio Cibola saw that smile on the Rio Kid's lips. "Captain Pryor, you do not seem impressed by this gold."

The Rio Kid eyed Cibola, standing there beside the open vault.

"I'm thinkin' how much good so much gold could do," he said pointedly. "You could help President Juarez make Mexico a decent place in which to live."

Cibola's face went gray. "Juarez!" he spat.

"He thinks only of the peons. Bah!"

"Mebbe the peons will be top dog one of these days, Cibola."

But Cibola only curled his lips in scorn. "My father built the Fortress of the Sun. Built it for a purpose. He found this gold hidden on the mainland, where padres from the Mission San Cristobal had buried it. He educated me in Mexico City. For one purpose, I repeat—so that I could take my place in the sun. You speak of peons. They are born to be ruled. I, Cibola, will be their ruler."

Shaking with anger, Cibola slammed shut the vault door, locked it and put the golden key in his sash. He patted the spot where he had placed the key, smiling wickedly at Henry Bruner.

"I read your thoughts, Senor Bruner," he said in a mocking voice. "You would do murder for that key."

But Henry Bruner was not to be trapped so easily. He shrugged.

"You have gold. I have what you want. We make a fair exchange." He smiled at Cibola as if the matter were settled.

WITH a sharp command, Cibola called the two guards who had accompanied them to the vault. The soldiers stepped aside to bring up the rear.

"Too bad you are so rash, amigo," Cibola said to the Rio Kid, with a laugh. "You would have been welcome in my camp. But now you die."

The Rio Kid looked into Cibola's black eyes. "There's only one reason I'd like to join you. To put a bullet in your head."

Cibola raised his hand as if to strike. Then he relaxed.

"Well-spoken. For that, I make your death as lingering as possible."

They went back up the passageway, climbed the stairs and were once again in the long room.

And there, standing at the head of the long table, dressed in white, with a fringed manola over her slender shoulders, was Laurita Sandoval. The girl's face was as white as her dress. Her black hair glistened in the light that seeped through the narrow barred windows. At sight of the Rio Kid, she put a hand to her lips. Then she seemed to cringe as Cibola strode toward her. He took her hand, put it to his lips.

Hot anger surged through the Rio Kid as he saw the girl pull away from Cibola. He thought of Bill Knight, a prisoner here, doomed to die. But the fight was not over. There must be some way in which he could beat Cibola and Bruner.

Cibola had turned and was smiling.

"Senor Bruner, you have done me a favor by escorting the lovely senorita to the Fortress of the Sun."

[*Turn page*]

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CHAPTER XV

Cochise

PROTESTINGLY, Bruner held out his pudgy hands, palms up, as if to say what he had done was nothing. Gabe Reel leaned against the tapestried wall, his hot, dark eyes on the girl's slender figure.

The Rio Kid's brain was alive with thoughts of escape. He was groping for some means of fighting back. To make a break here in this room, would only invite death for himself and Celestino. Besides it would endanger the life of Laurita.

Now that two soldiers were guarding the Rio Kid and Celestino, Gabe Reel holstered his gun and accepted Cibola's invitation to drink to the bride.

"When does the priest come?" Laurita asked, as the lord of the island poured a drink for Bruner and Reel. "And when do I see my father?"

There was a triumphant smile on Cibola's lips, as he lifted his glass.

"To the most beautiful senorita in all Mexico. I asked her father for her hand. He refused. Now his rancho is in ruins and I still have his daughter."

"Answer my question!" Laurita demanded, her dark eyes fiery.

Cibola touched his lips with a lace handkerchief, stuffed it up the sleeve of his velvet jacket.

"There will be no priest," he told the girl. "You and I will be married in the ritual of the sun. We climb the Pyramid of the Sun and when the sun sinks in the evening sky, we shall be married."

The girl straightened, her face white. Her fingers gripped the fringe of the manola across her shoulders.

"My father!" she breathed.

Cibola shrugged. "The Senor Sandoval died. He was an old man."

Laurita Sandoval's lips parted in horror. "You killed him! You murderer!"

One slim hand flashed to her waist and a thin-bladed knife sparked in the sunlight.

"I, too, die!" she cried and raised the knife to plunge the blade into her heart.

The Rio Kid went cold. He was too far away to keep the girl from carrying out her threat. But Gabe Reel was there. He dropped his wine glass to the floor, seized the girl's wrist. He tore the knife from her grasp, stuck it in his belt. Cibola laughed.

Laurita's eyes flamed with hatred. "You filthy beast!"

But Cibola only smiled. "Your sweetheart, the Senor Knight, dies on our wedding day—today!"

Then he clapped his hands. Two fat Indian women padded into the room. They seized the girl and pulled her through a doorway at the end of the room.

Gabe Reel was breathing heavily, his dark eyes on the door where the girl had gone. Cibola noted his expression.

"Senor," he said mockingly, "you have spilled wine on my carpet." He pointed to a wide spot on the Indian rug at his feet, where Reel had dropped the wine glass.

Henry Bruner rubbed a hand over his chin, looked at Cibola.

"We have important business. Have you forgotten that this is the day we meet Cochise?"

And suddenly the Rio Kid got an idea. It was a wild, desperate plan. This was the time for words, not for physical action. He forced a contemptuous grin to his lips.

"Cochise won't have nothin' to do with the likes of you!" he snapped at Cibola. "He may be only an Apache chief, but he'll know yuh're nothin' but a bag of wind."

Cibola's face hardened and an ugly light came to his eyes. He stepped forward, his black eyes burning with hatred. His hand lashed out, striking the Rio Kid across the mouth. Pryor tasted blood, but that contemptuous smile never left his lips.

"You dare speak to me like that!" Cibola snarled.

But the Rio Kid went right on. "Cochise will listen to General Crook. The Apache is wise. He'll know yuh're only tryin' to use him and his people."

Celestino stood there, staring at the Rio Kid, his mouth open. Henry Bruner growled an oath. Pryor felt a carbine muzzle at his back, as one of the soldiers stepped forward. He knew that all Cibola had to do was nod his head and his spine would be shattered by a bullet.

But Cibola did not give the signal. He stepped back from the Rio Kid, a perplexed light in his eye. Then he nodded, his teeth bared wolfishly.

"I'll take you to Cochise," he snapped. "I'll let Cochise see that even the special emissary from your General George Crook cannot escape me. The chance to watch you die, Captain Pryor, may be an added incentive to Cochise to visit my island as my guest."

HENRY BRUNER stepped forward, his fat face red with anger.

"Don't listen to him, Cibola!" he warned. "Pryor's slippery. He's up to some trick. I say, kill him now!"

Cibola whirled, his bony face white with rage. "I give the orders! I say Captain Pryor goes with us. It will be torture for

him to see Cochise and let his thoughts dwell on the men and women who will be slaughtered when the Apaches are fighting for me."

Then Celestino Mireles was led away. The Rio Kid tried to send the brave young Mexican a message with his eyes—a message of hope and confidence. He knew that Celestino would be locked up in the dungeon with Bill Knight.

With Cibola leading the way then, the others stepped out into the bright sunshine. The light blinded the Rio Kid momentarily. Bruner and Reel stalked across the courtyard. The two soldiers prodded the Rio Kid with their rifle muzzles.

And as he moved, the Rio Kid knew that he must not fail. The lives of Celestino, Bill Knight and Laurita, as well as hundreds of others who were not so close to him were in his hands. He had to succeed. If he failed, there would never be another chance.

The parade ground was filled with mounted troops, their uniforms spotless, their polished carbines glistening in the sunlight.

A few yards in front of Cibola's headquarters was another adobe building. As the Rio Kid went by, through the open doorway he saw stacks of rifles and cases of ammunition. He remembered the letter General Crook had received, pertaining to Bruner's purchase of Army guns and shells in San Francisco. The man had evidently fulfilled his part of the bargain with Cibola.

Von Pragar came striding across the parade ground, sword swinging at his side. He saluted Cibola.

"Everything is ready to welcome Cochise," he said in his guttural voice.

Cibola nodded. "Have the men wait at the dock. I want Cochise to be impressed." He smiled, pointed at the Rio Kid. "We have added bait, too, Colonel. Cochise will enjoy seeing Captain Pryor die."

Under heavy guard, the Rio Kid rode to the wharf on the opposite side of the island from where he and Celestino had landed. Here were three sailboats and a schooner. Flat-bottomed barges fitted with benches and oarlocks, were pulled up on the beach. This would be the way troops were transported to the mainland, the barges probably rowed by Cibola's slaves and the barges were big enough to hold the mounts of the soldiers.

Cibola often led his men in wild raids on the mainland, Knight had said. It was on such a raid that Travers had deserted, to head north for help. Knight had done the same a month later, when Travers had failed to return.

The Rio Kid was hustled down the wharf to a schooner. Sails were hoisted and the boat moved toward the open waters of the Gulf. On the shore, those murderous thugs, the soldiers of Cibola, were waiting, ready to snap to attention the moment the schooner returned with Cochise, the Apache chief.

At a signal from Cibola, the Rio Kid's hands were tied behind his back with rawhide thongs. And as he stood there on the deck, watching the island fade in the distance, he realized that he had never encountered an enemy more deadly than Cibola.

There seemed to be no way out, but the Rio Kid was used to battling against terrific odds. He thought of Celestino, locked up in the dungeon. But the Mexican youth shared his own philosophy. Neither of them would ever give up, no matter how dark their hopes might be.

There were half a dozen soldiers making the trip. They lounged against the rail. Several of Cibola's slaves were busy handling the sails.

Von Pragar came swaggering along the deck, tripped over a coil of rope. There was a gray-haired old Mexican working there. With an oath, von Pragar kicked the man in the ribs. The Mexican cringed, but uttered no sound. It was Mendoza, the man the Kid had met in Gil Tomaso's bunkhouse the night before.

When von Pragar had gone by, Mendoza looked at the Rio Kid and nodded slightly. The Rio Kid beat down the hope that suddenly rose in his breast. What could one gray-haired old Mexican accomplish against the guns of Cibola's ruffians?

They approached the mainland, dropped anchor a hundred yards from shore. A rowboat was lowered. The Rio Kid was shoved down into the boat. With two slaves at the oars, they headed for shore. Cibola and Bruner were at the prow, talking to Gabe Reel. There was no chance for the Rio Kid to make a break. Von Pragar sat directly behind him.

Cibola was talking to Gabe Reel. "If Cochise meets us as you say, you've done a good job," Cibola told Reel, and smiled grimly. "I hope for your sake that he keeps his appointment."

Reel's dark face flushed. "He'll be there," he snapped. "He said he'd smoke the pipe on

[*Turn page*]

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the day of the old moon. That's today." He pointed to the sky, where a thin slice of moon was dimly visible in the bright sunlight.

THE rowboat was lifted high by the breakers and sent shooting down toward the beach. There was no sign of life. Nothing to indicate that Cochise and his braves were within a hundred miles of this lonely spot.

The two slaves leaped out as the boat struck sand, pulled it to higher ground. Cibola was the first to step out. There was an arrogant tilt to his head. He walked up the sand, stood there, booted feet apart, a white sombrero tilted low over his dark eyes.

It was a lonely spot, twenty yards of sandy beach, flanked by twenty-foot cliffs. Heavy brush grew at the top of those bluffs.

Von Pragar tied a long cord to the thongs that bound the Rio Kid's wrists. He held the end of the cord in his hand. They were taking no chances on the Rio Kid's making a break.

There was a worried look on Bruner's face. Maybe Cochise won't show up," he said anxiously.

But Rubio Cibola seemed confident as he stood there with his hands behind his back.

"Cochise will be here, eh, Reel?" he said.

The Rio Kid realized then that the half-breed had handled all the negotiations with Cochise. He recalled his own meeting with the Apache chief at the San Carlos Reservation not so many months before. Reel had also been there at the same time.

Reel glanced at Cibola, and there was hatred in his eyes. The Rio Kid was sure that Bruner and Reel were plotting to get their hands on Cibola's gold, though he did not know how. What he did know was that the gold was all that interested them. But they were playing along with Cibola until the proper time arrived for them to act on their own.

One moment there was no movement ahead. Then suddenly a dozen bronzed bodies were visible, sunlight putting a shine to their red skins. Indians, coming between the bluffs.

The Rio Kid felt sudden hope surge through him. There was Cochise in the lead. He was flanked by hard-eyed, suspicious braves. Cochise strode to Cibola, held up his hand in the sign of peace. If he recognized the Rio Kid, he gave no sign. Then he squatted in the sand, his braves following suit. He looked at Gabe Reel, grunted something in Apache.

Cochise was leaner than most of his tribesmen. His face was thin, and his high forehead marked him as a redskin with brains. Every muscle in his bronzed body showed. He wore a red head-band, but there was not a weapon visible.

Then Cibola sat down, crossed his legs, that confident smile still on his lips.

CHAPTER XVI

Pow-wow

RUBIO CIBOLA began talking in Spanish, which Cochise understood. He talked long, telling of the great wrongs done the redman by the blue devils, the U. S. Cavalry. He told of broken promises and how the redman had been robbed of his lands. Cibola spoke with an earnest note in his voice. To his horror, the Rio Kid saw the grave concern which showed on the face of the chief at Cibola's words.

All wrongs could be righted, Cibola went on to say, if only Cochise would join in the great fight. Guns and ammunition would be furnished. Also gold and the finest mounts in all Mexico. The eyes of Cochise's young braves glowed at these words.

Cochise sat and pondered when Cibola had finished. The Rio Kid knew the thoughts that were going through the Indian's mind, and his one hope was that he would get a break, see some chance to turn Cochise against Rubio Cibola.

With the hot sunlight beating down on his bare head, the Rio Kid let no emotion show on his face. Von Pragar was at his side, chest out, always the soldier. Henry Bruner was rubbing his jaw, looking worriedly at Cochise.

For perhaps half an hour, no one spoke. The heat increased. Cibola sat cross-legged on the sand, that arrogant smile on his lips. The Rio Kid knew the man had only contempt for these Indians. Once he used them, he would dispose of them in due time.

The Apache chief was not to be hurried and Cibola seemed to know how to deal with Indians. He did not urge, did not plead. He just sat and waited.

The Rio Kid bided his time. Sweat ran down over his forehead and the ropes bit into his wrists. His arms ached and his head felt light. But he stood there proudly, his chin out, eyes straight ahead. He knew that Cochise was watching him and he could not afford to show any sign of weakness.

At last Cochise stared into the Rio Kid's face with his black, liquid eyes. For long minutes he stared unblinkingly as the Rio Kid prayed he would remember the day of their meeting with Captain Jeffords. Would Cochise remember the day Saber had outrun the best horses in the Indian camp? Would Cochise remember how he had called Saber the Horse-That-Runs-With-Wings?

Cibola saw Cochise staring at the Kid.

"I have planned a feast on my island," Cibola said then. "You, Great Chief, and your men are welcome. Come, and we will smoke the pipe. You will receive your first payment in gold, if you join me."

Cochise grunted. His braves began to chatter excitedly in guttural Apache. Those who understood Spanish were translating Cibola's words. But Cochise just sat there, cross-legged, staring at the Rio Kid.

Cibola waved a hand at Pryor. "I have a prisoner. This man was a captain of the blue devils, the long swords. His men rode through your rancherias, killing your women and children. I brought him to face the Great Chief, Cochise. This man was sent to spy. The Great White Father in Washington wants to murder all Apaches. General Crook has been sent to swing the long sword. Never again will Apaches ride the trails and no longer will they be allowed to live." Cibola pointed a long finger dramatically at the Rio Kid. "This man was sent from General Crook. He dies so that you and your people can live. Come to my island and watch him die, and fill your hands with gold."

Hate-filled eyes were turned on the Rio Kid as the braves surrounding Cochise began to mutter ominously. But Cochise showed no expression. He sat there as if waiting for Pryor to talk. This was the big chance, the big gamble.

"Cibola speaks with the forked tongue," the Rio Kid said in Spanish. "Captain Thomas Jeffords has sent message for the Great Chief."

Von Pragar raised a hand to the Rio Kid, but Cibola shook his head and sat there in the sand, confidence on his bony face. The Prussian grunted an oath, lowered his hand.

The Apache chief's eyes had lighted momentarily at mention of Jefford's name. The Rio Kid seized his advantage.

"Your friend, Captain Jeffords, wants you to bring your people home—to the reservation. All will be forgiven. General Crook, who swings the big sword, will put the sword away. He will shake the hand of the Great Chief, Cochise, and welcome him home."

Cochise looked steadily at the Rio Kid. There was a heavy silence when Pryor had finished. Henry Bruner wet his lips, looking anxiously at Cibola, as if trying to flash some message for him to shut up the Rio Kid. But Cibola only smiled.

At last Cochise spoke in broken Spanish. "My people tired of great fight. We want spend our days in peace."

THE Rio Kid leaned forward, every nerve in his body taut as a bowstring.

"Captain Jeffords does not speak with forked tongue. Come back to the reservation. Jeffords and General Crook smoke the pipe with you."

The young braves began to jabber. They gestured at the Rio Kid, their voices flat with anger. Cochise raised his hand and they quieted. But they were surly and glared at the Rio Kid.

Pryor stood straight, the sun beating down on his head, eyes lighted with desperation. If he failed now, only long years of bloody warfare remained.

"Come home, Great Chief," he pleaded. "Captain Jeffords will deal with you fairly. That is his word. He gave it to me. Captain Jeffords does not speak with the forked tongue."

The young braves argued with Cochise, who still sat stolidly in the hot sun, no emotion on his bronzed face. The braves were not in favor of returning. They wanted war. Cibola was offering them horses, guns and gold. After all, a brave's life was dedicated to the war trails. It had been so since the first Apache had ridden down from the great country of many lakes. And it was written that they should fight, for that was their creed. They were warriors.

But Cochise was wiser than most redskins. The Rio Kid watched him and could guess his thoughts. Cochise knew that his people would bear the brunt of the fighting. Cibola would reap the rewards. Also, Cochise had learned that the United States cavalry was made up of reckless troopers who would never give up. The odds against the Apaches were great.

The Rio Kid made one last desperate appeal. "Think wisely, Great Chief. Your people can have peace or bloodshed."

Rubio Cibola threw back his head and laughed. "I wanted to see how far Pryor would go." Then he turned to Cochise. "The man lies. He makes only promises. I can prove my good faith."

He clapped his hands. The two slaves in the rowboat jumped out and ran to a clump of brush at the foot of a bluff. They came out lugging a heavy wooden box between them. They sweated and grunted, putting the heavy box in the sand beside Cibola. They pried off the lid and went back to wait in the rowboat.

Cibola got to his feet, pulled a shiny new rifle from the box, handed it to Cochise. The chief took the weapon, fingering the trigger. Cibola pulled out other guns, passed them to the braves. They chattered excitedly, waved the guns in the air, patted the barrels and examined the mechanism. They were like children, but the Rio Kid knew how deadly they would become if those guns were loaded.

With his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his gold-braided pants, Cibola stood looking down at the Indians, a patronizing smile on his lips. Henry Bruner had recovered some of his composure now that things seemed to be going their way. Gabe Reel's dark eyes were lighted with amusement as

he watched Cochise and the Apaches handle the rifles.

Von Pragar stood with his heels together, the rope that was tied to the Rio Kid's wrists held tightly in his hands.

"Ach, the guns talk," he said, speaking for the first time.

Then Cochise got to his feet, holding the new rifle in his hands. He was a short, wiry figure, his dark eyes alive, yet his features composed. He looked at the Rio Kid, waved a hand toward the back country.

"I find the Horse-That-Runs-With-Wings," he said in Spanish.

And the Rio Kid knew that Cochise had seen Saber in Manuel Guiterrez' pole corral. He longed to ask if the Mexican and his family were safe, but held his tongue. One thing was certain. Cochise had been expecting him.

Then Cochise turned to Cibola. "I no go with you now," he said. "I meet again here on day of full moon."

Cibola's eyes went as cold as black ice, but he bowed and forced a smile to his lips.

"The day of the full moon is tomorrow," he said suavely. "We meet then."

Abruptly Cochise held up his hand. It was a signal to his braves, who followed him up the gully, clutching the new rifles in their hands. They melted into the brush and were gone.

Cibola turned on the Rio Kid, his teeth bared in a snarl.

"You and the Apache dog are amigos, eh?" he snapped. "When I bring your body to Cochise tomorrow, he will know who speaks with forked tongue. The deaths of you and your two compadres will afford much amusement to my lovely Laurita on her wedding day."

ONCE back on the schooner, the Rio Kid knew that he had won the first battle. He had stalled Cochise for another day. But the situation still looked hopeless. Celestino and Bill Knight were prisoners. Cochise was merely awaiting the new day. If Rubio Cibola went to meet the Apache Chief on the morrow, then all was lost. Cibola must not return!

Sails were raised and the schooner moved back toward Cibola's black island. And as they neared the shore, the Rio Kid's heart was leaden, for it seemed that he was sure to fail. True, Cochise had been reluctant to join Cibola, but that did not mean that he would not agree at their next meeting.

The Rio Kid was staring over the rail, watching the blue waters of the Gulf and thinking of how much had happened since he and Celestino, with Knight, had first approached Cibola's island in the canoe, when suddenly something tugged at the bonds that held his numb wrists. He turned his head. Mendoza, the gray-haired slave of Rubio Cibola, was sawing away at the rawhide with a long-bladed knife.

"I steal thee knife," he whispered. "I 'ave you free soon."

Sweat broke out on the Rio Kid's forehead. He looked up and down the deck. Cibola and Bruner were talking with Gabe Reel. The hands were busy with the sails. But von Pragar was swaggering down the deck, coming this way.

The thongs fell away from the Rio Kid's wrists. And for one fleeting instant his eyes met those of the slave.

"Gracias," he whispered. "Over the side with me."

Needles of pain shot up Pryor's wrists and arms as the circulation began to be restored. At the same instant von Pragar spotted him moving his arms, shouted a warning and tugged at a belted gun. He was running now, shouting at the soldiers, who lounged in the scant shade cast by the mast.

Without a breath of delay, the Rio Kid leaped over the rail and dropped into the sea. Von Pragar fired as the Kid's body dropped, the bullet whining past the escaping man's head.

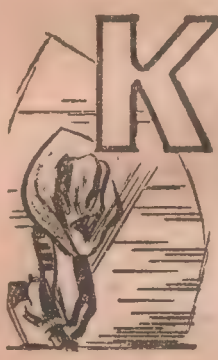
Then the Kid heard Mendoza's cry of triumph.

"Viva Mejico!"

There was another shot, and the yell died in Mendoza's throat. And the Rio Kid knew that brave Mendoza had paid with his life for helping in the escape.

CHAPTER XVII

Battle for Freedom



KICKING out hard as the water closed over his head, the Rio Kid swam desperately, hoping to cover as much distance as possible before he surfaced for breath. He heard the slap of bullets hitting the water, but none of them touched him. He kicked off his boots.

Then, when it seemed as if he would have to breathe and let the treacherous sea water into his lungs, he reached the surface. He gasped for air, and had a momentary glimpse of the schooner, lying some fifty yards away. It was still under full sail, and the Kid could tell that Cibola was shouting at the helmsman to head back. The renegade's soldiers at the rail were firing.

The Rio Kid went under and lunged ahead as half a dozen slugs ripped the spot where he had been an instant before. He swam under water as long as he could, then again

came to the surface and lashed out for the shore.

There was still firing from the schooner, but the Rio Kid swam as fast as he could, hoping the distance would lessen his chance of being hit. He prayed that Cibola's soldiers ashore would not have heard the firing and commotion, or would not understand it if they did, and would remain lined up at the wharf, on the other side of the island, to welcome the Apache chief who would not be there.

If there were guards on the beach, however, the Rio Kid realized that he was in a worse fix than he had been the night before, when he and Celestino had made their break. In broad daylight, he would be an easy target.

When it seemed to him that he must have been swimming for hours, he plunged though the breakers and staggered up the beach. Gulping air into his lungs, he saw the schooner disappearing around a point of land. Cibola was heading for the wharf under full sail. Once those soldiers of his were turned loose to hunt down the fugitive, there would be no chance of escape.

The Rio Kid plunged on, entering the forest of candelabra cactus. He half-ran, half-walked, so as not to attract too much attention to himself in case he should be seen. The sun, beating down, dried his clothes. But he was half-maddened by thirst, for the sea water had parched his throat.

As he ran, thoughts of Celestino was in his tortured mind—and thoughts of Bill Knight and Laurita Sandoval. He had to get them free! This was his chance, slim as it was, and his last and only chance.

One thing Cibola had overlooked. He had forgotten that even slaves will fight, given half a chance. That fact had been brought home to Bob Pryor on the schooner, when Mendoza had cut him loose, and had died with a battle cry on his lips.

A cactus thorn cut his foot and he had to stop and pull it out. Then he plunged on, his blue eyes lighted angrily, his jaw at a fighting angle. He could see the Pyramid of the Sun rising into the sky ahead.

Abruptly he reached the edge of the cactus forest. Ahead was a plowed field. Slaves were working there. Pryor's heart sank. There was no sign of Gil Tomaso. He had counted on finding the young Mexican officer.

Then he rushed forward. Some of the slaves saw him and paused with shovels in their hands. They had been turning water into an irrigation ditch, but now they stared stupidly, not understanding this rushing figure in the soggy clothes.

There was a guard at the edge of the ditch, a short-bodied renegade in the uniform of a Cibola soldier who wore a wide-brimmed hat and carried a carbine. But he had his back to the running Rio Kid.

"Back to work, you dogs!" he yelled at the slaves and lashed out with a bull whip.

The lash caught a slave on the cheek, drawing blood. Then as the man staggered under the blow, the guard whirled, sensing danger. He saw the Rio Kid bearing down upon him. Throwing the bull whip to the ground, he raised his carbine, but the Rio Kid had seized a shovel from a slave. He brought it down on the guard's head before the man could fire.

The renegade sank down in the muddy irrigation ditch without a sound. The Rio Kid snatched up the fellow's rifle as Gil Tomaso stepped out of the corn patch ahead, with half a dozen slaves and two guards. Tomaso's face lighted when he saw Bob Pryor.

Shouting angrily as they spotted their fallen comrade, Cibola's soldiers started to bring up their rifles. Tomaso whirled.

"Viva Mejico!" he shouted, and piled into the nearest soldier.

Instantly other slaves took up the cry. The two guards were thrown to the ground, their weapons taken. It had all happened so quickly that the two soldiers never had a chance. When they tried to rise, their own rifles in the hands of the slaves smashed down, knocking them senseless. With split skulls, they lay in the broiling sunlight, grim reminders of what happened to men who made themselves a part of another man's diabolical scheme to enslave his fellow men.

TOMASO came bounding forward, a grin on his face. He seized the Rio Kid by the hand. Swiftly the Kid told Tomaso and the others of the plan he had in mind, while they filled their pockets with shells from the soldiers' bandoleers.

"It's our only chance," the Rio Kid said grimly. "We got to strike—now! Before Cibola gets ashore and sends his soldiers after us."

Once again he took a pair of boots from a fallen soldier, and nodded his satisfaction because they were a better fit than the ones he had taken the night before.

Then armed with three rifles, the men rushed toward the main gate, with Captain Bob Pryor in the lead. Other slaves came running, as they saw what was taking place.

One of the guards at the main gate spotted them, threw up his rifle and fired. A peon plunged into the dust. But before the guard could fire again, he was overwhelmed, smashed to the ground. Two more renegade soldiers came charging for the main gate. The Rio Kid and Tomaso shot them dead.

"Viva Mejico! Viva Mejico!"

The strident cry was echoing from the throats of half a hundred men who had been slaves in body, but never in their hearts.

This was more deadly than any charge the

Rio Kid had led in the Civil War. Here his fighting men had only three carbines against the guns of Cibola's men. Soldiers, who had been lounging in the court-yard, snatched up weapons and rushed forward. Guns blasted. Soldiers died and slaves went down with yells of, "Viva Mejico!" on their lips.

Then the ground seemed to shake as if thunder rolled in the hot blue sky. And the Rio Kid knew what that meant. Cibola had come ashore and his mounted fighters were swooping down to attack the main gate.

Precious moments were wasted as the Rio Kid and Gil Tomaso fought their way across the court-yard. The hard-packed ground was strewn with the bodies of soldiers and slaves. And all the while the roar of hoof beats grew louder.

"The arsenal!" yelled Pryor. "Arm your men!"

Gil Tomaso shouted the order at his men who were snatching guns from fallen soldiers. But brown-shirted renegades already were rushing for the adobe building that housed the arsenal. They threw a wicked fire into the ranks of the advancing slaves.

A cry of pain came from Tomaso, and the Rio Kid saw the Mexican's left arm flop queerly. But the young officer gritted his teeth and moved ahead with his men. Tomaso was urging his men on. Men who had been slaves but a few moments before, yelled their defiance at Cibola's men and charged the arsenal.

The Rio Kid fired his hot carbine and saw Brown-shirts topple into the dust. And each time a Cibola man went down, the Rio Kid grinned, for this brought them one step nearer their goal.

Slaves dashed into the arsenal, to reappear with rifles. Boxes of shells were smashed open. The court-yard was a bedlam. Men were shouting, guns barking. Here and there one of Cibola's Brown-shirts would appear, only to be mowed down. Bullets droned through the air.

The Rio Kid felt a slug nick his cheek. Blood ran down his neck and he impatiently wiped it away with a swipe of his hand. The roar of hoofs was louder.

Grabbing up a six-gun and belt from one of Cibola's fallen officers, the Kid stuffed shells in his belt. Then he whirled to Tomaso, who was ushering a band of his men out of the arsenal, loaded down with bandoleers and rifles. Tomaso had made a sling for his arm out of a bandanna. His face was gray with pain, but he was game.

The Rio Kid had given orders to close the gate. He looked back over his shoulder. A dozen of Tomaso's men were trying to get to the gate, but three of Cibola's Brown-shirts there were protected, having taken cover where the gate folded back to meet the adobe wall. Their accurate fire was driving Tomaso's men back across the court-yard.

Just as the Rio Kid was about to rush to the gate, he heard a familiar voice. It reached him in a momentary lull in the firing. He whirled, raced around a corner of Cibola's adobe house. The barbecue pits, as well as wooden tables and benches were here, and the Rio Kid caught the aroma of barbecued beef. But the cooks who had been Cibola's slaves had deserted their posts to join Tomaso.

Then the Rio Kid saw something else—Celestino Mireles and Bill Knight! They were standing on piles of wood blocks, stacked crookedly so that one misstep would topple them over. Ropes were around their necks, pulled up over two projecting beams from the adobe house. Their hands and ankles were tied.

IT HAD been Celestino, of course, who had called, and the Mexican youth gave a glad shout when he saw the Rio Kid. Knight's face was drawn, and veins stood out on his forehead.

The Rio Kid rushed forward, his only thought to rescue Celestino and Knight. The roar of hoofs had ceased. There was silence out beyond the gate, and the Kid realized that Cibola probably was taking time to size up the situation before sending his men through the gate.

Pryor had nearly reached his friends when two brown-shirted soldiers popped out from behind one of the huge stone idols that lined both sides of the court-yard. One of the men lashed out with his gun butt, to knock the wook blocks from beneath Celestino's feet and leave him hanging. The other guard leaped toward Bill Knight.

But the big six the Rio Kid held in his hand roared twice. The two men piled up there beside the gallows, life gone from their bodies. Then the ex-cavalryman was leaping forward. He snatched a knife from the belt of one of the fallen soldiers and cut Celestino and Knight free.

Celestino's dark eyes lighted. "General, you 'ave come in time," he said.

Bill Knight grinned. "When they fished me out of the water last night, I figgered I was a goner. Cibola was goin' to hang me and Celestino. Sort of a sideshow for Cochise."

More shouts were coming from the court-yard now and there was a new blast of gunfire. The Rio Kid whipped around. Tomaso's men had not been able to close the gate. Cibola's brown-shirted soldiers were pouring through the gap on foot, rifles blazing, making a curtain of leaden death for their approach.

"There's fightin' to do!" the Rio Kid yelled. "Here comes Cibola's army!"

Gun thunder rolled across the court-yard of the Fortress of the Sun. Men died, their screams rising high above the crash of weapons and the whine of bullets. With Celestino and Bill Knight flanking him, the Rio Kid turned to face the oncoming charge of brown-shirted soldiers.

The gate had not been closed in time and now the gap was piled with dead and wounded. But Tomaso's men were not giving up. Knight and Celestino had grabbed up guns from dead soldiers and, with the Rio Kid, were laying down a withering fire.

Tomaso and his men had taken refuge behind the stone idols lining the court-yard. Cibola's soldiers were in the open and were paying dearly for every foot they gained.

Knight's face was grim as he leveled his rifle and fired. A Brown-shirt pitched forward.

"That's one for Tom Travers," Knight growled, and fired again. "Laurita's here," he said to the Rio Kid. "That pig, Cibola, told me. But I reckon she's safe enough in the big house till we get this licked out here."

Celestino had just tallied a Cibola man. The Rio Kid fired twice and sent a soldier toppling to the ground. Gunsmoke was so thick in the court-yard it seemed that the very walls would have been shaken down by the thunder of guns.

Then the Rio Kid saw von Pragar urging his soldiers forward from the protection of one of the stone idols.

"The house!" the Rio Kid yelled at Tomaso. "We'll hole up there!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Trapped

QUICKLY Tomaso began backing with his men toward Cibola's main building as the Rio Kid considered the odds against them. Cibola's army greatly outnumbered them. He had counted on getting the main gate closed, but if he had tried to help do that Celestino and Knight would have been dead. Some of Cibola's men would have succeeded in knocking the wood blocks from beneath their feet.

"You stay here," he told the young Mexican and Knight. "I'm gettin' von Pragar. Get into the house and find Laurita!"

He slipped behind the column of stone idols, threaded his way past Tomaso's fighting men, who were inching back toward the house. If only he could nail von Pragar, that might have a demoralizing effect on the soldiers. Though of course, there was still Cibola and Bruner to lead them.

So far Bruner and Cibola had not put in an appearance. But the Kid did not take time to puzzle that out now.

Von Pragar was waving his sword and shouting orders from the protection of one of the idols, although the Rio Kid had only momentary glimpses of the Prussian. He was keeping out of the fight, issuing commands from a comparatively safe place, letting his men bear the brunt of battle.

A grim smile tugged at the Rio Kid's lips. He moved forward, reached an open space and ran. Bullets sought him out. Soldiers yelled and fired, but the Rio Kid also thumbed two quick shots. A man went down. Another screamed and clutched a bullet-shattered arm.

Slugs whistled around the Rio Kid, but he went on, his sturdy legs carrying him toward von Pragar. The Prussian sensed his presence, whirled and fired, the bullets slicing across the Rio Kid's ribs. But the pain did not stop his wild charge. He kept behind the stone idols as much as possible, so as not to be in the line of lead that was sweeping from the guns of Gil Tomaso and his men.

Von Pragar's teeth were bared as the Rio Kid bore down on him. He had lost his cap and his close-cropped yellow hair seemed to stand on end. He lashed out with his sword, and fired again as the Rio Kid closed in. The bullet nicked the calf of Pryor's leg. He stumbled, went down.

A triumphant shout came from von Pragar's lips. He lunged with his sword. His men also were trying to close in, but Celestino, Knight and the fighting slaves were keeping up a hot fire from the house which held them back.

Brown-shirted renegades, branded with the Cross of the Sun, piled up in the court-yard. The Rio Kid was aware of that for the instant he lay there on the ground. Then he was rolling aside, feeling the breath of von Pragar's slashing sword. The Prussian, off balance, tried to swing up his gun. And as the Rio Kid fired, it was to the courageous gray-haired Mendoza who had cut him loose on the schooner that he dedicated the blasting shot.

Von Pragar stiffened, his knees buckling. Then his eyes rolled back in his head and he dropped, his sword clattering to his side.

One of Cibola's officers tried to rally the soldiers, but vainly. Seeing von Pragar die had taken the heart out of them.

The Rio Kid sprinted toward the house, keeping in the shelter of the stone idols. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw Cibola's Brown-shirts pouring back out the gate. They had had enough.

With more shouts of, "Viva Mejico!"

Tomaso's men came out from their shelters and gave chase. Gil Tomaso, his left arm in a sling, was urging them on.

"Wait!" yelled the Rio Kid. "It may be a trap!"

But he might as well have tried to stop flood-waters with his bare hands. Slaves were getting their chance to turn on their masters, and there was no denying them. They poured across the court-yard, hot on the heels of Cibola's retreating men. There was not a Brown-shirt left in the gateway. They were running across the open fields, with Tomaso's men yelling and firing at their backs.

The Rio Kid reloaded his gun, turned toward the house.

"Celestino—Knight!" he shouted. "Come on! We'll give Tomaso a hand!"

There was no answering shout from the house—and there was not a man on his feet in the court-yard except Bob Pryor. Tomaso and his men were all outside the walls, hoping to finish the Brown-shirts once and for all.

There was a clammy feeling in the pit of the Rio Kid's stomach as he moved toward the house. Had Knight and Celestino been downed?

The heavy oak door stood open. He skirted a high-wheeled cart, piled with firewood, similar to the one in which he and Celestino had tried to hide in that morning. It was standing beside the barbecue pits.

GUN in hand, the Rio Kid advanced toward the silent house. He nearly tripped over a tin of kerosene which stood by the pits. It had evidently been used to start the fires.

Only spasmodic firing came from the fields beyond the Fortress now. The fight seemed about over as the Rio Kid moved toward the door of the main house. Something warned him of danger there yet he had to find Celestino and Knight. They might be dead or badly wounded.

He stepped across the threshold and blinked. It was gloomy in the big room after the bright sunlight.

"Drop your gun, Captain Pryor!" Rubio Cibola's voice cut through the stillness. "Or your friends die!"

The Rio Kid's eyes had become accustomed to the gloom now. He saw that a section of the wall was open. There was a secret entrance to the house. And standing there with their hands above their heads were Celestino, Knight and Laurita Sandoval.

Rubio Cibola was beside the long table, a gun in his hand, a cruel, triumphant smile on his thin lips. Backing him up were Henry Bruner and Gabe Reel, both armed.

"Drop the gun!" Cibola snapped again. "Or I'll put a bullet through the girl's head! Just as a start. Then Knight and your partner will die."

The Rio Kid let his gun fall to the thick carpet. This was the toughest blow of all. Just when they had victory within their grasp, they were faced with defeat.

Celestino's face was grave as he stood there, hands above his head. His eyes were on the Rio Kid.

"When we see you kill von Pragar, we come look for the senorita," he said.

"And Cibola was here!" Knight snapped, shooting a look of hatred at the island ruler.

Laurita's cheeks were pale, but there was no fear in her dark eyes as she stood beside the man she loved.

Cibola chuckled. "You try to outwit me," he told the Rio Kid. "But I am master. I have secret entrance to the Fortress—a tunnel beyond the gold vault and the dungeons. I, Rubio Cibola, hold the high cards." He watched the Rio Kid's grim face, enjoying the situation. "Only a portion of my soldiers stormed the gate. The rest are awaiting a signal. When my men retreated from the gate, I knew the slaves would follow. They cannot think for themselves. That is why they are slaves."

The Rio Kid's own brain was busy, trying to figure a way out, now that he knew that Cibola had held most of his mounted troops in reserve. Tomaso and his men out in the fields would be cut off once the new force of Brown-shirts came through the gate and recaptured the Fortress.

"Why didn't you bring the soldiers up through the tunnel?" the Rio Kid asked, stalling desperately for time.

Cibola laughed. "No one knows of the tunnel but myself and my friends." He nodded at Gabe Reel and Henry Bruner. "The Senor Red Lampsell is at the top of the pyramid, using a mirror. When my men see that flash they will come."

It was at that moment that Henry Bruner stepped nearer Cibola and jabbed a gun against his spine.

"This is turning into quite a party," he said, his cherubic face wreathed in a smile. "You don't win this hand, Cibola. Just toss down your gun and hand over that vault key. All we want is your gold. Red Lampsell ain't going to signal anybody."

When that gun muzzle touched his spine, Cibola's face became satanic in its fury. But he just stood there, stiff as a ramrod, his eyes murderous.

"So you betray me," he snarled.

"That's the general idea," Bruner answered. "We'll use you and Pryor and the rest for hostages. That'll keep your Brown-shirts and the slaves off our necks till we can get the gold loaded in the schooner. Then you boys can have the island all to yourselves."

Gabe Reel's gun covered the Rio Kid and the others who were lined against the far

wall. Bruner reached in front of Cibola, took the gold key from his red sash, though Cibola still clutched his gun. Sweat stood out on his swarthy forehead. His lips trembled with rage.

Reel looked at the key, lust for gold shining in his eyes. That was when the Rio Kid went into action. He dropped to the floor, scooped up his gun and fired, all in one smooth motion. Reel turned too late, getting in a wild shot that whistled over Pryor's head. Knight had knocked Laurita to the floor when the Rio Kid dropped, for both he and Celestino had been watching the Kid, waiting for some signal to act.

That first shot from the Rio Kid's gun caught Reel in the chest. He sagged and pitched over on his face, his boots kicking at the carpeted floor.

Then he lay still.

HENRY BRUNER'S brain did not work fast enough. Cibola had stepped aside, away from Bruner's gun. Pulling over the heavy table, the lord of the island ducked low.

Celestino and Knight were trying to get their guns, which were on a chair near the door.

Now that Cibola was out of sight, Henry Bruner was left exposed. His pudgy lips twisted in rage as he fired. But the Rio Kid was dodging, triggering his gun as fast as he could work his finger. The roar of the gun was deafening in the room.

Henry Bruner was trying to run, stark fear of death on his fat face. His shirt front was turning red. He halted in his mad flight, tried to lift his gun, then slowly sank to the floor. His fat body collapsed like a roll of canvas.

Then the Rio Kid whirled. Celestino and Knight had their guns.

"Cibola he go!" Celestino cried and pointed at the wall.

The opening was closed. The lord of the island had managed to make his escape when Celestino and Knight had dashed across the room for their guns. And the Rio Kid had been too busy with Bruner to see or stop him.

Bill Knight helped Laurita up from the floor. She was shaken, but there was a brave smile on her lips. There was only an occasional rifle shot outside and the Rio Kid guessed that Tomaso and his men had rounded up the Brown-shirts who had first stormed the gate.

"We got to warn him," the Rio Kid said grimly. "Cibola will get to his other soldiers, or kill Red Lampsell up there on the pyramid and flash the mirror signal himself. Tomaso'll be in a trap if them other Brown-shirts get through the gate and hold the Fortress. We ain't enough to stand off a good-sized force."

CHAPTER XIX

Show-down

JUST a few minutes had elapsed since the Rio Kid had stepped through the doorway of the long room and walked into the trap. Bruner and Reel, in their greed for gold, had given the Kid a break. He glanced at their bodies, huddled on the floor. Henry Bruner had had a comfortable living from his steamboat line, but his yearning for power had made him sell out his own people.

Suddenly there were two shots outside. A man screamed, the sounds seeming to come from some high place above them.

"The pyramid!" Bill Knight shouted. "That sounded like Red Lampsell yellin'!"

Then, in the distance, came the pound of shod hoofs. The Rio Kid knew what that meant. Cibola, making his way through the secret passage, had reached the pyramid and killed Lampsell, now that Cibola knew from Bruner that Red was not going to send the signal to the Brown-shirts. Cibola had taken care of that himself, for the ground seemed to rock from the thunder of hoofs.

Outside the firing increased. The Rio Kid rushed to the open door, in time to see Cibola's mounted Brown-shirts sweeping across the open field, coming from the direction of the wharf. Tomaso's men were opening up on them, but the speeding horsemen made poor targets.

Cibola was a good general all right. His strategy had been diabolically clever. He had held off the majority of his men, waiting to see if a small force could quell the slave uprising, touched off by the Rio Kid. Now that Tomaso's slaves had taken out after the retreating foot soldiers, the Fortress was virtually unprotected. Bob Pryor knew he had to act and act quickly if those mounted Brown-shirts were to be kept from recapturing it.

"Cover me!" he yelled at Celestino and Knight, as he leaped out the doorway. A wild plan was in his mind. His Mexican friend and Bill Knight were opening up from the doorway. Laurita was out of sight.

The Rio Kid sped toward the barbecue pits and reached the high-wheeled cart there while Celestino's battle cry sounded loud and clear as the first of Cibola's mounted Brown-shirts swept through the open gate.

The guns of Celestino and Knight caught the advance guard. Horses went down, men pitched through the air. Guns roared, renegade soldiers died as the redhead and Bob

Pryor's Mexican partner sent blasts of withering fire toward the gate.

There was momentary confusion down there. But the Rio Kid knew the soldiers would soon rally, and they were in overwhelming numbers.

Bullets thudded into the cart, piled high with wood, as the Rio Kid seized the kerosene tin beside the pits. With a quick toss, he sent the tin onto the wood in the cart. A trickle of oil came out the opening. Then he fired at the can and as holes appeared kerosene cascaded over the wood.

Slugs sent at him by the soldiers at the gate chipped splinters into his face, but his lips were grim, his jaw muscles tight. This was their only hope. The sheer madness of his plan might see them through. Pryor scratched a match, flung it into the kerosene-soaked wood. Blue flames shot skyward.

Snatching the cart tongue, the Rio Kid wheeled the cumbersome vehicle toward the squat adobe building that housed Cibola's arsenal. Bullets droned in the air, but Cibola's men were becoming panicky. Those in the court-yard were trying to turn their horses and charge back out through the gate. But oncoming riders pushed them into the court-yard. Still guns blasted, lead hammered at the cart. But straight toward the wide doors of the arsenal headed the Rio Kid, the flaming cart rolling in front of him, its heat searing his face.

The cart was rolling fast now. Pryor let it go, ducked behind a stone idol. A bullet threw chipped stone into his face.

He watched the cart careen through the open door of the arsenal. Then he was sprinting toward the house. A bullet sliced his thigh and he dropped, rolling across the ground. Then somehow he was on his feet again.

"The pyramid!" he shouted. "Follow me!"

Knight and Celestino understood. Shielding Laurita with their bodies, they dashed out of the house, heading for the Kid. Cibola's men in the court-yard were milling in confusion. They knew what would happen when the flames from the cart reached the ammunition cases. But they could not flee, for more mounted men poured through the gate, pushing them back, not knowing of the danger.

Pain from his bullet wounds was beginning to sap the Rio Kid's strength, but he gritted his teeth and raced on. They passed the house, reached the towering pyramid, with its grass- and weed-covered stone blocks reaching toward the sky.

PANTING, their faces streaked with powdersmoke and sweat, Pryor, Celestino and Knight reached the rear of the pyramid. Laurita was winded, her white wedding dress ripped and smudged with dirt. But she was game.

They crouched there as a tremendous roar shook the earth. The air was filled with fine dust, heavy with the stench of powder.

Celestino's eyes were shining. "The arsenal! She blow up!"

Then there was a blasting crackle of exploding shells as the flames reached the wooden ammunition boxes. It sounded like a thousand rifles cutting loose at once. Whistling slugs were everywhere, thudding into the adobe wall, gouging stone from the pyramid blocks.

Warning the others to keep down, the Rio Kid climbed up on the pyramid base. He had a momentary glimpse of the burning arsenal and of Cibola's men throwing aside their guns, scrambling for their lives to escape the exploding slugs.

Beyond the wall, Tomaso and his men were charging toward the Fortress, yelling as they swept forward.

The Rio Kid was grinning, his wounds forgotten. But that grin faded as he heard a rustling on the ground where thick brush grew close to the pyramid. Then Rubio Cibola was parting the brush, stepping out of an opening in the stone. He caught a glimpse of the Rio Kid.

Whirling, he fired, but he was in too much of a hurry, and the slug went wide. There was a satanic snarl on his lips. The Rio Kid dropped the hammer of his own gun. The dead click seemed to freeze the blood in his veins. His gun was empty!

The Rio Kid had been trained to instantaneous decisions, and more than once reflex actions had saved his life. Here, once more, life or death depended on swift action—and action of his own alone, for Knight and Celestino, back of the pyramid, could not help him.

Then he was leaping. Straight down he went. Cibola's hate-masked face came closer. The renegade tried to fire again, but the Rio Kid's boot heels struck his chest. Both plunged to the ground, rolled over.

But almost instantly Cibola, quick as a cat, was on his feet, a pistol in his hand. He kept firing at the dodging figure of the Rio Kid.

Pryor's leg was weakening. The bullet nick he had received from von Pragar was numbing the calf of his leg. But sheer desperation drove him on. And panic was on Cibola's face now.

The explosions from the arsenal were diminishing. But there was a rattle of gunfire from the court-yard. With a scream of rage, Cibola turned and ran, the Rio Kid on his heels.

As they reached a corner of the long adobe house, they could see the arsenal, a blackened ruin. A dead Brown-shirt lay on the ground by the house. The Rio Kid snatched up the dead man's rifle.

From outside the wall, came triumphant

shouts. "Viva Mejico!"

Tomaso and his men had the upper hand again!

Desperately Cibola was trying to escape, trying to elude the grim-jawed man who dogged his trail. At last he seemed to sense that further flight was useless. He looked at the court-yard littered with his dead soldiers, then abruptly he whirled and blasted a shot so close that powder seared Pryor's cheek.

The Rio Kid grabbed him with his left arm. He wanted Cibola alive, if possible. Gil Tomaso would want to take him to Mexico City for a hanging. That would be an example to other traitors of the New Republic.

But Cibola was built of steel springs and Pryor's strength was going fast. Cibola pulled free, tried to chop down with the barrel of his gun. The Rio Kid ducked, swung up his carbine. Cibola was set for his final shot when the Rio Kid touched the trigger of his rifle.

There was a roar and Cibola seemed to break in the middle. Celestino and Bill Knight were running up then, their guns at ready. But their help was not needed.

The Rio Kid watched Cibola stagger, his lips still curled, his eyes murderous. Then the black light went out from those eyes and he died before he hit the ground. And as the Rio Kid stood there, he thought of Jeb Miller, the scout, of Miguel Sandoval, and of old Mendoza and all the others who had died to satisfy Cibola's dream of conquest.

The Rio Kid's leg gave way then and he sat down on the ground abruptly. Celestino was instantly beside him, his dark eyes anxious. He and Laurita took care of the Rio Kid, sterilizing his wounds with whisky they found in the house.

BILL KNIGHT who had run out into the court-yard returned with a grin on his lips.

"Tomaso has got Cibola's gunnies lined up! The fight's over!"

Later, when the Brown-shirts had been disarmed, Gil Tomaso sent one of his men to the mainland.

"He will find General Hernandez. We will soon have Mexican cavalry here."

The Rio Kid grinned. "Speakin' of generals," he said, "seems to me President Juarez is liable to make you one."

Tomaso shook his head. "I'll stay a captain. A general has too many decorations to wear. . . ."

The next day Tomaso personally took the Rio Kid and his friends to the mainland in Henry Bruner's schooner. After they had shaken hands with the smiling young officer, they headed for Manuel Guiterrez' shack.

"Apaches come," Guiterrez told them, with a bewildered shake of his head. "Chief see

[*Turn page*]

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your caballo, Saber. He call Saber thee Horse-That-Runs-With-Wings. They leave and don't come back."

Laurita and Bill Knight said good bye to the Rio Kid and Celestino there at the shack. There was a little church in the next valley where they would be married, then hurry on to the Sandoval rancho.

They were going to rebuild the rancho in memory of a gallant man, Senor Miguel Sandoval.

It didn't take the Rio Kid and Celestino long to reach Yuma. At least it didn't seem long after their hectic experiences. They found General Crook at the Yuma House. There was a detachment of cavalry in the street. The general was ready to ride. When he saw Captain Bob Pryor and Celestino, his eyes softened.

"Welcome back, Captain Pryor!" he greeted heartily. "I am glad to report that Cochise has returned from Mexico. He wants to settle down on the reservation with his people, under the watchful eye of Captain Thomas Jeffords."

The Rio Kid and Celestino both grinned.

"I'm glad to hear that, sir," Pryor said. "I just stopped by to report."

"And what have you to report, Captain Pryor?" the General asked, a twinkle in his eye. "From the looks of you two, I'd say you need some new clothes and a month's vacation. Now about that report."

"Our mission was completed, sir," the Rio Kid said grimly.

General Crook nodded, shook hands with them both. Then he pointed out the hotel window.

"I'm riding to meet Jeffords now," he said. "Cochise will be there. Maybe you old friends would like to palaver."

But the Rio Kid shook his head.

A little later, he and Celestino watched the cavalry troop ride smartly out of town, boots shining, sabers glistening. A lump came in Bob Pryor's throat as he watched those gallant soldiers, for he longed to be riding with them. But instead, with a final glance at the troop, Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, mounted Saber, and with Celestino at his side, rode toward the sunset, along the dim trails that led to new adventures.

FURTHER EXPLOITS OF CAPTAIN BOB PRYOR IN

COLORADO RIVER GOLD

By TOM CURRY

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

Kilrain swung around on a gigantic masked figure

Boards for Boothill

By ARCHIE JOSCELYN

Cowboy Luke Kilrain rides to help a pard and is confronted by a land-grabbing set-up that calls for six-gun justice!

THERE had been trouble here, not so long before. Luke Kilrain, a big man on a big horse, pulled up frowningly. Beside these wheel ruts across the prairie which passed for a road, boards were scattered in a sprawling heap for fifty feet in either direction—new, gleaming boards of various sizes, lumber fresh from the yard. And the ground, in one spot, was muddy—red mud, though this was not red soil.

Whatever had bled so copiously and had perhaps died here, whether it was man or horse, had been removed, but the dark stain of disaster remained. Taken with this load of wrecked lumber, it gave an added meaning to the brief message even now reposing in his

pocket. Luke knew it by heart. Signed by Sandy McKee, it read:

Luke, I have got me a lumber-yard. Need you bad.

Luke Kilrain had lost no time in responding to the summons, for when Sandy wrote like that, things must be bad. Sandy had a way of getting into more trouble than anybody Luke had ever known, but he was usually capable of handling it himself.

Though what Sandy would be doing with a lumber-yard, Luke couldn't figure. Like himself, Sandy was a cowboy, but, unlike himself, he didn't know timber, either in the forest or piled up in boards. But he had a lumber-yard, it seemed, and trouble with it. And here was lumber spilled beside the road—and trouble had spilled bloodily.

A man equally as big as Luke was riding up, but whereas Luke rode a cow pony and was at home in the saddle, this man bestrode a crow-bait of a work horse with a sad apology for a saddle, and his arms jerked in sympathy with his pumping knees at every move of the horse. His lean, bony face and protruding wrists spelled the rest of it. Homesteader, or nester, according to one's particular sympathy or antipathy toward the breed. His protuberant eyes seemed to goggle at Luke.

"Bad business," he said, his nasal voice like that of a cawing crow, and jerked a thumb toward the spilled lumber.

"Looks so, for a fact," Luke agreed. "What happened?"

"Reckon that's some of Barringer's work." The nester's lips drew back in a wolfish snarl as he mouthed the name. "Sam Clinton had that load of lumber. One of his hosses was shot, his wagon turned over, and he got banged up plenty. Scared him so, he's left the country. Same as the rest of us'll have to do if Barringer has his way."

"Who's Barringer?" Luke asked.

"Barringer? Yuh must be new hereabouts. He's a bloodsucker—some call his kind cattlemen. Hogged the whole range 'fore anybody else come along, and claims half the country now for his Chain Ranch. Aims to run everybody else out, even if he ain't got no legal claim to it. Tried to chase me off my little quarter-section, but I held a shotgun on him and says to him, 'Barringer,' I says, 'Bill Bob Grady don't run easy.' So he left me alone. But I don't sleep easy nights."

"And yuh figger he done this, eh? But why? What's lumber got to do with it?"

"Who'd do it but him? As to why, I'll tell yuh. This is a good country, but there ain't no wood or timber anywheres. A lot of folks like me has took up land, and others'd like to. Some build soddies, but did yuh ever try to make real barns and buildin's that way? Most folks want real buildin's. There's a good lumber-yard in Monarch, but if anybody tries to buy lumber, this is what happens to him!" He jerked his thumb toward the wreck, and spat.

"Feller that had the yard, he was goin' broke, and he got so scared for his life he sold out here a little spell ago to a stranger and left the country. Sold out for a song. But this other hombre can't sell lumber—folks is scared to buy. It's shore a fine country when one big outfit can drive out or kill all the little fellers. Me, I'm still stickin', but I suppose I ought to have better sense."

NODDING, he kicked his horse and rode jerkily away. Kilrain rode on toward Monarch, thoughtfully. So that was what Sandy was up against, eh? As Bill Bob Grady had said, it seemed to be bad business.

Monarch sprawled on the prairie like a lost hound dog, exposed to the pitiless glare of sun on its scattered soddies and few unpainted frame shacks, to the unbroken sweep of wind across weary miles. Save for sage, there was no brush, here in southeastern Montana, no trees, nothing to break the crawling monotony of space. It was fair cattle country, but for farming—Luke shook his head. Maybe this Barringer was doing the nesters a kindness, in chasing them out.

Monarch looked like a ghost town as he rode up. His depression deepened as he saw the lumber-yard, set off at the edge of town, looking as lifeless as the rest, with a "Closed" sign hung across the gate.

Luke frowned at the sign, wondering that the peppery Sandy would ever put up such a thing, and swung down from his horse. He noted that a board fence surrounded the lumber-yard, and a small warehouse and office building stood in one corner, the doorway facing the street. Luke reached for the doorknob, then stopped, his eyes narrowing on the dark, sluggish stream slowly seeping out under the crack of the door.

That was blood—more blood.

Something was partially holding the door, as he shoved it open. Sandy McKee was sprawled there, in a contorted position, the blood still seeping slowly from a gunshot wound in his left shoulder. A smeared stain across the floor looked as if he had been shot and had fallen, then had managed to drag himself almost to the door, seeking help, before he had collapsed.

A swift examination showed Luke that his friend was still alive, though he wouldn't be for long, at that rate. But the wound wasn't as bad as he had feared at first. It was high up, having missed the heart and lungs, and clean. The bullet had gone clear through him, somehow missing bones. He had bled a lot, but if that was stopped he would have a chance.

Luke wasted no time in looking for help. It was more than likely that there was no medico in this town, anyway, and he knew pretty well what to do.

He was just finishing bandaging the wound when a step sounded at the door. There was a startled gasp, and Luke looked up to see a girl staring at him with suddenly blanched cheeks and quivering lips.

"Sandy!" she gasped. "What happened? Who are you?"

Luke Kilrain jumped and caught her as she swayed, eased her into the chair by the desk.

"Take it easy," he adjured. "Sandy's comin' along all right. My name's Kilrain. Sandy sent for me."

"Luke Kilrain!" The girl was staring at him with sudden hope in her eyes, a touch of color returned to her cheeks. "I know. Sandy told me he'd written you. But he—he isn't—"

"He's alive," Luke said, a little grimly. "I found him this way when I got here a few minutes ago. If we can get him home, take care of him, I reckon he'll pull through. He's tough, Sandy is. Yuh know where he lives?"

"Oh, yes. It's just a short distance from here. I'm Judith—his sister."

Kilrain's mouth quirked for an instant in that odd smile of his.

"That sort of flattens me," he confessed. "I knew Sandy had a kid sister somewhere, but I never dreamed she was a grown-up young lady and pretty as a picture. Guess I heard that a few years ago, come to think of it. I can carry him, if yuh'll lead the way. And yuh might tell me what the trouble's all about. Like usual, Sandy didn't tell anything when he wrote."

"There's all sorts of trouble," Judith said worriedly, leading the way. "Sandy had some money, and he was thinking of buying a ranch. Then he heard of this lumber-yard, for sale at half what it was worth, for the owner said he had to go to a new climate for his health. Sandy bought it. He said you would come and tell him what he needed to know. But we can't sell lumber. There's a big ranch, the Chain, owned by a man named Barringer—"

She opened the door of a small, neat, newly-painted house, and led the way to a bed. Luke eased his burden on it, readjusted the bandages, and straightened.

"Likely he'll be unconscious for a spell, which is the best thing for him. I think I'll go back and sort of look around. By the way, did he put up that 'Closed' sign?"

"Not that I know of. I'm sure he didn't."

Kilrain's face was grimmer as he tramped back to the lumber-yard. Judith's story had been substantially the same as that told by Grady—of indirect threats, shootings from ambush, trouble. He paused at the gate, studying the sign. It had been scrawled with a pencil on a board, nailed up there recently. And that certainly was not Sandy's scrawl. Kilrain ripped it down.

IT LOOKED to him as if Sandy had outdone himself, this time. Then his face relaxed a little as he took swift stock of the yard. There was a big stock of lumber here, big, rearing piles of it. It looked like a good yard, so maybe Sandy's investment hadn't been too bad—if he could dispose of the stuff now that he had it.

Luke pumped water in a bucket, and had the floor mopped up when another step sounded outside. Glancing out, Luke saw a lumber wagon and a team of horses.

"Howdy?" the driver greeted. "Yuh open for business?"

He was a young fellow, with a likable face, obviously a homesteader. Kilrain noted that a Winchester lay across the wagon seat.

"Shore, we're open," Kilrain assured. "The lumber's here for anybody wants to buy."

"That's me. I need lumber to build a house on my claim. My name's Eddy." The young fellow grinned. "Got a girl comin' out here in a few weeks to marry me. Have to have somethin' better'n a soddy for her. I got the best water in this whole section of country, next to the Chain. Live over next to Bill Bob Grady. What that feller wouldn't give for water like I got!" His glance sharpened. "Say, you ain't McKee, are yuh?"

"I'm helpin' him out. McKee's been shot."

"Shot?" Eddy stared. "How yuh mean? When? Who by?"

"Today. Right in here. Looks like nobody saw who did it. And he's still not able to talk."

Eddy's face sobered.

"Sounds like some of the Chain's work," he said darkly. "Cuss Barringer! But he can't bluff us! There'll be a lot of others wantin' lumber, soon as the word spreads that we can get it. The hombre that had this yard before was afraid to sell to us."

"Pick out what yuh want," Luke said. "It's here to be sold."

Eddy drove his wagon through the gate, and Luke Kilrain helped him get his load, chiefly two by fours and one by twelves. It was late afternoon, the sun was westering as Eddy climbed to the seat of his wagon again.

"I see yuh got a gun," Kilrain commented.

"And I know how to use it." Eddy nodded. "Well, see you later. Be dark now 'fore I get home."

Luke Kilrain returned to the house, to find that Judith had prepared supper for him. There was no change in Sandy's condition. He learned, without surprise, that Sandy had sunk every cent he possessed in this venture, and Judith's money as well. At that, he had got a bargain—under normal circumstances. Now Kilrain was not so sure.

"Here's a couple of notes Sandy found under the door," Judith said, and gave them to Kilrain.

They were scrawled, penciled notes, in the same handwriting as that "Closed" sign. Written on cheap paper. Both were the same—warnings not to sell lumber, to get out of the

country, or to expect trouble. They were signed with the initials "BB."

"Bill Barringer," Judith said bitterly. "He's not content with having half the country now. He wants it all!"

Kilrain pocketed the notes thoughtfully. In a day or two, when he got a little time, he would have to ride out and have a talk with this Bill Barringer.

The setting sun looked blood-red in the west as he stepped outside again. Dusk was settling, a pleasant coolness had followed the heat of the day. But Kilrain was oppressed with a sense of foreboding as he returned to the office.

Then he heard it—a faint sound, from off where the sun had left a faint glow in the sky. Like the popping of firecrackers on the Fourth of July.

But this was not July, and that was gunfire. Four shots, then silence, broken only by the sighing whisper of the night breeze across the prairie. Heavy shots, like those of an old Sharps. And there had been no sharper, answering crash of Eddy's Winchester.

Luke Kilrain got his horse and rode that way. The darkness was fairly deep by the time he had covered a couple of miles along the ruts of a scarcely-used road across the grasslands, and in the blackness he missed, at first, what he had been looking for. But not much farther on he came upon what he had feared and expected to find—several sticks of lumber, scattered beside the road.

There was more lumber farther along, then the overturned wagon, with the rest of the load spilled all around. There was no sign of the team, or of Eddy.

RETRACING the back trail as marked by the scattered boards, he finally found Eddy, when his own horse snorted and shied at something in the grass.

The homesteader lay sprawled beside the road, and there was nothing that Luke could do for him. He thought of the girl, waiting, somewhere back East, for that house which would never be built nor shared. That good water of which Eddy had been so proud, would, perhaps, profit the Chain now.

What if Judith had been the girl? Kilrain shivered a little at the thought, and turned Eddy over. There were four bullet-holes in his back.

"And his team ran away," Kilrain filled in, grimly. "He never saw who shot him, never had a chance to use his own gun. No more'n Sandy did this mornin'."

He got Eddy across his saddle and back to town. Men accepted his explanation and carefully refrained from asking for details, Kilrain noted grimly. It looked as if the hovering fear of one big outfit had most of this country badly buffaloed. What would be the reaction of the homesteaders to this latest killing?

For a while, the next morning, it looked bad. There was no business. Then a horseman rode up and dismounted. It was Bill Bob Grady.

"I wanted to ask yuh about Eddy," he explained. "He was my neighbor—mighty decent feller. I'd shore like to be certain who got him. Though I guess everybody knows well enough!"

He listened to what Luke Kilrain could tell him, shook his head.

"It's bad business," he said again. "And just at a time when a lot of folks want to come in here and settle. And yore friend havin' all his money sunk in here and no market."

He spat through the open doorway, making a brown blob in the dust.

"Tell yuh what. I ain't aimin' to be bluffed. Mebbe some of us homesteaders could get together and kind of take this lumber-yard over, if so be he wanted it that way. We could contrive to give him back most of what he put into it, I guess, by scrapin' the bottom of the bar'l. Make it a little easier for him, mebbe."

"Mebbe he'd be interested, later," Kilrain said. "Mebbe not."

"Well, I got to be ridin'," Grady said. "Have to work while yuh're still alive, in this country." He grinned feebly at his own joke and jounced away.

Shorty after, another customer arrived, likewise with a lumber wagon, but this one was minus the box, so that he could get a big load of lumber. He was a big, yellow-haired Swede, and he carried no guns—but his hands were big.

"I'm Larsen," he announced. "I hear you'll sell us fallers lumber. That's what we want."

"Shore," Kilrain said, and stared as he glanced down. He picked up something from the floor beside the desk. He hadn't noticed it before. It was another scrawled warning.

Either quit now or take the same as what the others have got.

B B

Kilrain crumpled it in his fist. His voice was chill.

"If yuh want to buy, after what happened to Eddy, it's here for yuh," he said to Larsen.

"I ain't scared easy," Larsen said truculently. "I put near a year of hard work in on that claim of mine. Now they tell me I lose it all, 'less I get some improvements built quick. Well, by golly, I build."

"In that case, I've got an idea," Kilrain suggested. "Why don't all you fellers who want lumber come here together. Then load yore wagons and haul it together. And if there's trouble, yuh'll be able to give back as good as yuh get."

"By golly, I think you got something," Larsen agreed.

He tied his team and headed down town. A

couple of hours later, there were half a dozen wagons at the lumber-yard. Together they loaded up, and together they drove away. This time, there would be no shooting in the back.

Luke Kilrain returned, tired from a hard day's work, to his supper, which Judith had waiting for him. Color tinged her cheeks again.

"Sandy was awake and conscious for a few minutes," she reported. "Though he was too weak to talk. But I think he'll live now, thanks to you, Luke."

"Shore he'll live, and no thanks to me," Kilrain agreed. "He's tough."

"I've heard about what you've done, today," Judith went on, and her voice was suddenly anxious. "Barringer will be furious, of course. And since you had them all work together, they make too many to fight. So I'm afraid that he'll try and take it out on you."

"I'd like to see this Barringer—just once." Kilrain nodded.

"But not that way," Judith protested quickly. "I've heard talk that Grady has suggested that some of the homesteaders go together and try to raise enough to take over the lumber-yard. I think maybe that would be a good idea. If we could get back most of what we put in it, and buy a ranch somewhere, it would be a lot better than this."

"That way, yuh'd not only take some loss in cash, but lose all the profit that Sandy figgered to make," Kilrain pointed out.

"I don't care! What's profit, if both of you get killed? Are you going back there, now? Promise me you'll be careful."

"Why, shore, I always am," Kilrain assured, staring out through the window.

DARKNESS had settled again, and off by the lumber-yard there was something alien to the night—a sudden red tongue of flame. He opened the door.

"You stay here and keep an eye on Sandy," he warned Judith swiftly. "Don't forget he has to be watched!"

He was running now. A second glow was beginning to bloom on the air, off at some distance from the first. Here, from the looks of it, was the Chain's answer—one that Barringer intended should be final. And if he tried to put out those fires, there would be more bullets from ambush.

A third blaze was just getting started. It would be hopeless for him to try and put out the fires alone, and Kilrain doubted if anybody in town would dare help, since the destruction of the yard would not endanger the rest of the town. Well, he could use the fire for the same purpose that they intended it for. A shadowy figure ran skulkingly, and Kilrain jerked his revolver and fired.

A startled yelp attested that he had either scored a hit or a mighty near miss, and then, from a couple of directions, other guns were blasting at him. It looked as if Barringer had brought his crew along tonight.

Crouching down behind two piles of lumber, Luke Kilrain waited, then began firing carefully, methodically, at the gun flashes. Someone swore painfully. Then shadowy figures darted out from behind a pile of boards and came charging toward him, guns spitting.

The towering piles of lumber rose up all around, but Kilrain knew the place by now. The fire-glow behind the runners outlined them mercilessly, and he fired coldly. One went sprawling, as Eddy had sprawled the night before, save that these shots had not come treacherously from the rear. The other man ducked for shelter.

They would know just where Kilrain was now, and be sneaking around to try and take him from the rear. Kilrain slipped into a fresh position. Another figure moved, then dropped, squalling like a stuck pig with a bullet in the leg.

Luke Kilrain swung around fast and drove a quick shot at a gigantic figure which, looming against the fiery background, was almost upon him now. Barringer, they said, was a big man! And this man wore a mask tied across his face.

Kilrain's gun clicked on an empty shell. There was no time for reloading. He hurled the empty gun at his adversary, saw it strike the man's gun-arm and knock the weapon spinning before the man in the mask could center his aim. Then the big man was jerking a second gun with his other hand. Luke Kilrain dived headlong, his arms reached out, encircled the other man's legs, brought him crashing to the ground like a falling tree.

Kilrain was up first, and he had need to be. The masked man, apparently unshaken despite his fall, was getting up as well, big hands opening and closing. The red glare of the fire reflected horribly in his eyes. And now a couple of his men were rushing in as well.

There was a short length of two-by-four handy, and Luke Kilrain grabbed it, swung it and charged. It caught one of the two incoming men and dropped him like a felled ox. The other turned and fled. But the masked man was almost upon Kilrain again.

The club cracked, but the blow was a glancing one on the hip. It snapped the two-by-four, but only seemed to enrage the big man. He charged in, hands clutching, was straightened by a right to the stomach and a left to the jaw. And now it was Kilrain who was pressing the attack.

For an instant, something like fear glared in the big man's eyes, and he reached for a club of his own, his fingers closing on an outjutting length of four-by-four which would be little more to him than a baseball bat. Frenziedly he heaved to pull it loose, reddened eyes fastened on Kilrain.

This time there was consternation in Luke Kilrain's face, and the killer, misreading it,

heaved the harder. Kilrain tried frantically to retreat, stumbled, and scrambled desperately up again. The masked man had jerked the plank loose—and, all unwittingly, pulled loose the key plank which held in place the unwieldy, none-too-well-stacked mountain of lumber rearing above them. Already the big pile was starting to slide, to rear out crazily toward them.

The unhinged pile was plunging. Kilrain saw that to try and outrun it, to escape it's crashing fury as it slid and sprawled outward, was impossible. This was a Juggernaut let loose, a mountain of boards plunging at them like a runaway cayuse.

Too late the killer sensed what terrific forces he had released, and tried to run. Kilrain was running again, but not away from the lumber. Instead, as the first mass of sliding boards slid like a hungry wave at his feet, he jumped high in the air, straight at the spewing mass of it.

He heard a shriek of terror, cut off short as the roaring slide overwhelmed his opponent and flowed on like a river.

LUKE KILRAIN came down on the sliding mass, but the moving boards were beneath his feet, not over them. He climbed frantically, stepping high. More than once he had kept his footing on a mass of turning, twisting logs in a timber drive, and though this was a different thing, the experience helped. He slipped once, regained his balance by a desperate effort, then stood on the teetering, slowly settling mass as it came to a full stop.

There were yells, the sound of galloping horses, and he saw a score of men sweep into the lumber-yard. Then, spreading out, they began to jerk apart piles of lumber, to attack the fires which had been set. Larsen was at their head, and the other homesteaders were with him.

Before that attack the fires were soon out, and those who had set them had vanished with the fall of their boss. Larsen came up, grinning.

"We sort of figured you would yoost have a call from him tonight," he explained. "So we came back. We—"

He stopped, and his face grew set and grim. His big hands made gripping motions.

"What you think you want—some more of it?" he asked, and Luke Kilrain turned to see a big man behind him, a man with an arrogant face, but bewilderment was in it now.

"We 'bout ready to kill you, Barringer," Larsen added.

Barringer disregarded him.

"What's goin' on here, anyhow?" he demanded. "I came in to see what the devil was happenin'. I've been hearin' things—"

"You'll be hearin' plenty more, you skunk," Larsen grated, and the homesteaders surged forward behind him.

Kilrain checked the incipient rush with uplifted hand.

"The man who caused all the trouble is over there, under that pile of lumber, if yuh want to dig him out," he said. "I don't think he'll ever trouble anybody again. He's the man who's been usin' yore name, Barringer, tryin' to get yuh in bad. And a little more of the same would have set the whole town and country on yore trail, to clean yore outfit out and string yuh up, without givin' yuh a chance to do any more than go down fightin'."

"But what's it all about?" Barringer protested. "*I* haven't been threatenin' this lumber-yard, or the homesteaders, or killin' anybody!"

From the faces of the others, Luke Kilrain could see that they were equally perplexed.

"Dig him out, take off his mask, and you'll find Bill Bob Grady," he said. "When he signed those threats 'B B' that *could* stand for Bill Bob, but he meant them to be mistaken for Bill Barringer. He figgered he had everything just about under control till I came along."

"Grady!" Larsen echoed. "But why? What for? He was a homesteader, just like us."

"Mebbe he was a homesteader, but not like the rest of yuh," Kilrain said. "He had a few hired gunnies to help him, and he aimed to get this country, to scare off competition and get the lumber-yard for less than a third its value. To get you killed or run off, Barringer, so's that part of yore land could be homesteaded, and he'd get a fat fee from men he brought in who didn't know any better. The rest he hoped to grab and hold. He was playin' both ends against the middle."

"But Eddy was killed," someone protested. "And Eddy was his neighbor."

"And with some good water on his land, that Grady wanted," Luke Kilrain said dryly. "It was pretty easy, up to a certain point. Make everybody believe that the big outfit was responsible, tryin' to freeze out all the little ones. He didn't think anybody would catch on that one of the little ones was back of it till he was the big one, all at once, and then he figgered to be strong enough that he wouldn't care."

The fires were out now, and they were digging Grady out as well. A few of these same boards would have to be used to make a Boothill box for him.

Luke Kilrain turned back. Sandy should be conscious by now, and he would want to know about things. So would Judith. And Kilrain found himself curiously eager to tell her about it all.

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Next Issue: MEN WITH WOUNDS, by Johnston McCulley, and Other Stories!

A FOREMAN MUST BE SMART

By BAYNE HOBART

Buck Madden Proves His Mettle When Trouble Stalks!

"BUCK" MADDEN came out of the Circle S bunkhouse and was heading for the cavvy corral when another man in the outfit called to him.

"Hey, Buck!" shouted Tony Butler. "The Old Man wants you up at the house, pronto."

"All right." Madden turned and headed for the ranchhouse. "Thanks."

He felt good as he strolled through the warm summer morning. The way he figured, if John Stack sent for him it could mean only one thing. He was going to get the job that foreman Ed Hardy was leaving vacant to go with a bigger outfit.

Madden knew he had proved to the boss that he was a tophand and he got along well with the rest of the men. Of course, Tony Butler was mighty anxious to have that job as foreman, too, but Butler was a new member of the outfit. Madden had been with the Circle S for close onto six years now, and the Old Man always had been one to consider things like that.

He found John Stack sitting on the porch of the ranchhouse smoking an old pipe. The owner of the Circle S was an old-time cowman and looked it, what with his lean frame, gray hair and handle-bar mustache.

"Want to talk to you, Buck," Stack said, as the waddy came up on the porch. "As yuh know, Ed Hardy is leavin' and I need a good man to take his place."

"It wouldn't be fittin' for me to say I'm that man." Madden grinned as he seated himself on the porch railing—a big, dark-haired young man. "Yuh might figger I was boastin', Boss."

Madden kept hoping that Stack's daughter Sally might stroll out on the porch. The way he felt about it just the sight of her sure made a man's day brighter. She was as pretty as a little red wagon.

"The foreman's job with this outfit pays right well."

Stack knocked the ashes from his pipe, then filled it with fresh tobacco before he said any more. He never had been a man to hurry things along even when just talking.

"Enough for a man to figger on gettin' married if he had a mind to do it," he finally said.

Buck Madden blinked. He looked at the Old Man as if Stack had changed into a spooky longhorn that was heading straight for him. The way the boss talked sounded like he sure knew Buck Madden was in love with his daughter. And Madden thought that even Sally didn't know that.

"Reckon it would be," said Madden, thinking about the foreman's pay. "Yuh picked the man for the job yet, Boss?"

"Not yet." Stack struck a match and lighted his pipe. "It's a toss up between you and Tony Butler. Yuh've proved yuh're a good all-around hand and get along well with the boys. Tony hasn't been with the outfit long but he knows his job—and he tells me he's had experience in bossin' men."

BUCK MADDEN

"He's had experience all right," Madden said. "I worked in the same outfit with Butler in Arizona about seven years ago. I was the wrangler and he was segundo. He can boss men around to a fair-yuh-well."

STACK looked at Madden. There was something in the way the waddy talked about Butler bossing men that made the owner of the Circle S wonder. Stack wouldn't stand for anyone handling an outfit rough-shod.

"Yuh don't like Tony, do yuh, Buck?" Stack said.

"Not particular—though I've got nothin' special against him," Madden said. "Could be that yuh don't like oysters, or mebbe

carrots or somethin'. That's the way it is far as me and Tony are concerned."

John Stack nodded and smoked in thoughtful silence for a few moments.

"You want to marry Sally?" he finally demanded abruptly.

Madden gulped. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times but no words came out. He tried it again and the same thing happened.

"Don't do that," Stack said. "Yuh remind me of a trout goin' after a fly and I ain't been fishin' in ages. Besides I asked yuh a question."

"I heard that question, Dad," said Sally, as she came out on the porch. "And you should be ashamed of yourself—asking Buck if he wants to marry me. The idea! Aren't you taking a lot for granted?"

"He shore is," Madden said hastily. "What I mean—that is—" He felt like a horse heading into a deep snow drift. He kept getting his feet in deeper all of the time.

"You see, Dad?" Blond Sally stood there, young and lovely in her riding clothes. "Buck doesn't even want to marry me."

"But I do!" protested Madden. "I been aimin' to ask yuh for a long time, Sally."

"Buck Madden, I'm ashamed of you, too!" Sally's expression was serious, but her eyes were twinkling. "Have you no romance in your soul? The idea of saying things like that to a girl right in front of her father. When a man proposes to me we've got to be alone in the moonlight."

Madden's face was red, burning so much it felt like the skin would drop off. He had only one thought in his mind, and that was to go somewhere else fast. When Sally and her father both started hoorawing him like they were, it was too much for a man to stand.

"I got to be goin'," he said, getting off the porch just as quickly as he could. "Got to see a hoss about some oats—or mebbe some oats about a hoss. I disremember rightly."

As he stepped down off the steps with Sally's and the Old Man's laughter ringing in his ears he saw Tony Butler come around the corner of the house. He was certain that the big blond waddy had been listening, and when Butler spoke as Madden passed there was no longer the slightest doubt of it.

"Oh, Romeo, Romeo!" Butler said mockingly. "Where goest thou, Romeo?"

As far as Madden was concerned that was the last extra load to the pack that made the horse sway-backed. Madden swung and landed a hard fist squarely on Butler's chin. Butler reeled back from the blow, but he didn't go down. He lunged at Madden with fists flying.

Those two men didn't like each other and the way they started pounding looked as if they sure aimed to prove it for keeps. They were both about the same height and build and knew how to fight with their fists. Of course it wasn't professional boxing, but it was right brutal while it lasted.

"Stop it!" roared John Stack as he came down off the porch and hurried to the two fighting men. "What in the ring-tailed tarnation is the matter with you two jaspers anyway? Stop this fightin' right now! If yuh don't I'll knock some sense in yore heads if I have to do it with a gun-barrel!"

Madden and Butler stopped fighting. When the Old Man talked like that a man did as he said or got busy looking for another job.

"He started it," Butler growled. "Just hauled off and hit me in the jaw when I spoke to him right friendly-like."

"That's the way it looked to me, too," said Stack. He glared at Madden. "Don't seem that a man who loses his temper so fast could rightly handle the job of foreman of this outfit, Buck."

"I'm sorry, Boss," Madden said slowly. "And I'm apologizin' to you, too, Tony. I shouldn't have hit yuh like I did."

"I'm glad yuh admit yuh know when yuh're licked, Madden," Butler said, sounding right nasty. "Good thing the boss stopped the fight when he did—for yore sake."

"Yuh sound as dangerous as a spooky bronc," grumbled Madden. "And shore tell it scary."

Tony Butler looked at Madden and frowned like he found some hidden meaning in the dark-haired waddy's remarks. Madden glanced at Sally who had come down off the porch with her father. The way she was looking at him, Buck Madden, made him feel good.

"You've got a cut on your cheek that's bleeding, Buck," Sally said. "Come into the house with me and I'll fix it for you."

"All right," Madden said meekly. "Though yuh don't need to go to any trouble, Sally."

THEY walked back to the house. Butler stood talking to Stack. It looked like Butler was going to get that foreman's job, the way Madden figured things now. He felt silly about making a fool of himself like he had done.

Sally led the way into the living room. She got a wet cloth from the kitchen and wiped the blood off Madden's face, then put some court-plaster on the place where a ring on Butler's hand had cut the waddy's cheek.

"There—that's better," she said, when she had finished. "I'm sorry Dad and I teased you so much out on the porch, Buck."

"Reckon I didn't really mind." He smiled at her. "Looks like my fightin' with Butler lost me the chance of gettin' the job for foreman though."

(Continued on page 71)

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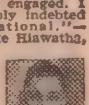

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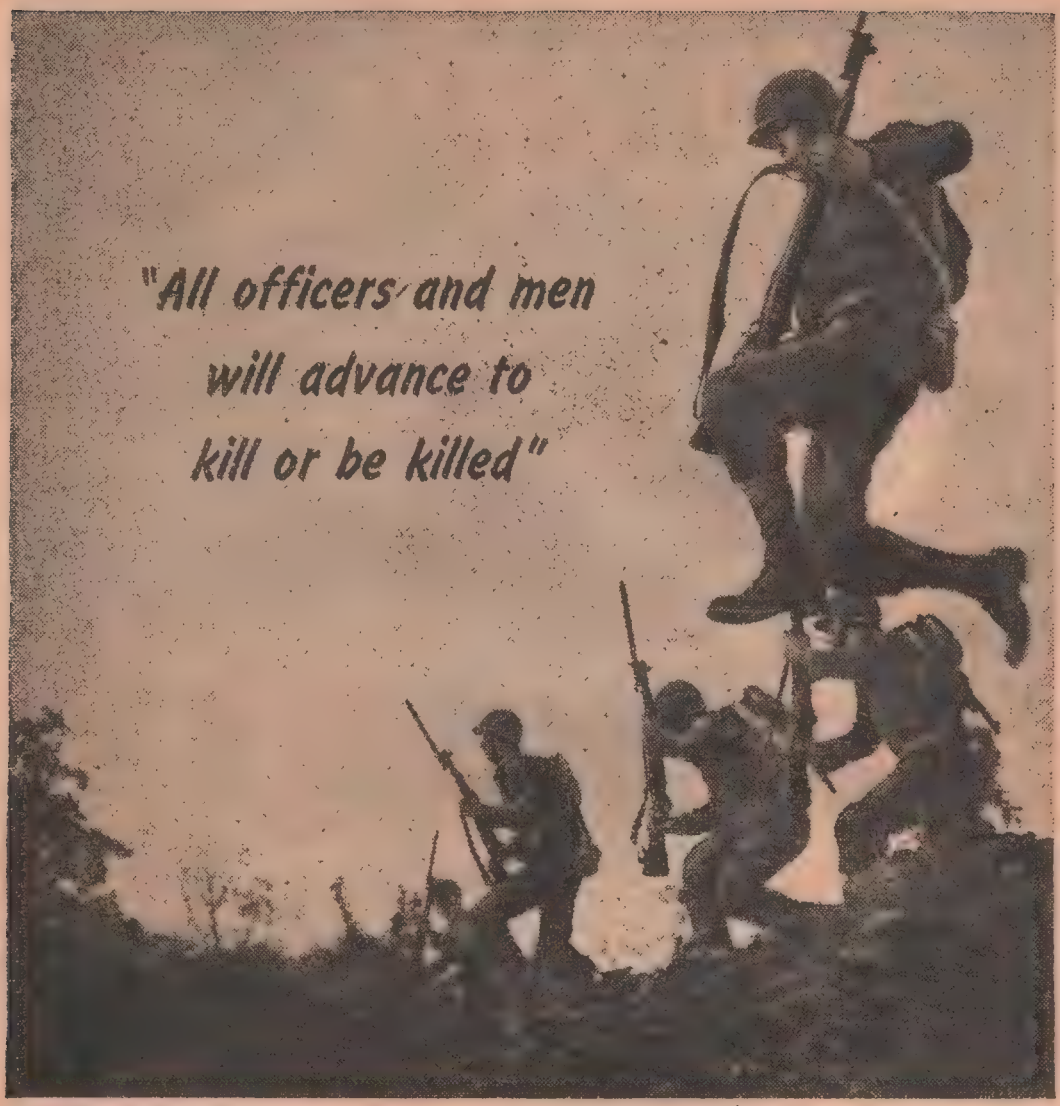

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"Keep your eye on the Infantry—THE DOUGHBOY DOES IT!"

A FOREMAN MUST BE SMART

(Continued from page 68)

"Not if you can still prove to Dad that you're a better man than Tony Butler," Sally said. "Dad will be fair about it." She looked down at the floor. "Tony asked me to marry him last night, Buck."

"There was a nice moon last night," Madden said like he thought that was important. "You accept Tony?"

"No." Sally shook her blond head. "Told him I was flattered but I hadn't made up my mind to marry anyone yet."

"Would yuh say the same thing to me if I asked yuh in the moonlight?" demanded Madden. "That is, provided I got that foreman's job?"

"Suppose you ask me when you do get it." Sally changed the subject abruptly. "Has any one ridden that new string of horses that Dad bought a couple of days ago, Buck?"

"Not yet." Madden said. "They are all supposed to be broke, so we just turned 'em in with the rest of the cavvy." He grinned. "But yuh've give me an idea, Sally. Yes, sir—a right fine idea."

Sally questioned him, but that was all Madden was willing to say. He was a man who could keep a secret.

The Circle S outfit went on with the day's work, and there was enough of it to keep all the men busy. Just before supper Madden and Butler rode in from the north forty. They weren't too friendly, nor were they making any show of hating each other. Just sort of neutral.

The two men stopped outside the corral to unsaddle their horses before turning them into the corral. Madden kept looking at a pinto in the corral that was one of the new horses Stack had just bought.

"That pinto shore is pretty," Madden said finally. "I'm goin' to ask the Old Man to let me have that hoss for my string."

"Don't look like so much to me," said Butler. "Too tame."

"Too tame for you?" Madden looked at the other man and smiled. "That's shore somethin'."

It wasn't until the next morning when the men were saddling up, getting ready for the day's work, that Butler walked over to Madden with his rope in his hand.

"I asked the boss for that pinto for my string last night," Butler said. "Stack said I could have the hoss. Took him away from you just like I aim to take yore girl."

"I was afraid yuh'd try to trick me out of that hoss," Buck Madden said sadly. "Yuh know—there's times when I think yuh ain't even honest. Yuh'd better let me have that pinto. I know that hoss, and you wouldn't like him."

"I've got the hoss and I'm goin' to keep

[*Turn page*]

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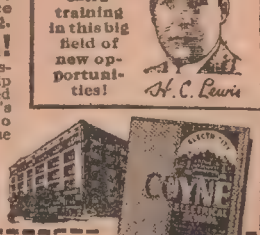

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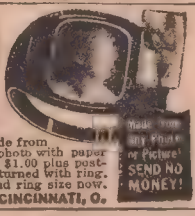

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him," snapped Butler.

He roped and saddled the pinto without any trouble—the horse acted real gentle and saddle broke. Madden saddled one of his regular string. He saw Sally and her father standing watching as the men rode out of the corral.

Madden drew his gun as he saw something that looked like a rattlesnake close to a rock. He fired at the object on the ground. At the sound of the shot the pinto that Tony Butler rode became the wildest bucking horse the Circle S outfit had seen in a month of Sundays.

"Stop him, somebody!" shouted Butler, grabbing leather and hanging on tight. "Get this hoss! Stop him before he kills me! Stop him, I tell yuh!"

If there ever was a man plumb frantic with fright it was Tony Butler as the pinto kept right on bucking just about every way a horse can buck. It was Madden and another waddy who finally got close enough to grab the pinto's reins that Butler wasn't even holding. They got the horse quieted down and Butler leaped out of saddle.

"So he's afraid of a buckin' hoss," Stack said tightly, as Madden rode over to him. "You knew that, didn't yuh, Buck?"

"Reckon I did," said Madden. "If yuh'll think back yuh'll recollect Tony hasn't rode anything but gentle hosses since he's been workin' here. Sorry I fired that shot—and me knowing that hoss was gun-shy—but I thought I saw a snake."

"Un-huh." Stack grinned. "I saw yuh aimin' at that old root. But I need a foreman who ain't afraid of anything—and who

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is smarter than the other feller."

"Then Buck is your man, Dad," said Sally, as she stood beside her father. "I've known that all along."

"Yuh're foreman of the Circle S startin' next week, Buck," said Stack and walked away.

MADDEN swung out of saddle and just stood there looking at Sally. The rest of the outfit rode out to start the morning's work and John Stack was talking right serious-like to Tony Butler.

"Looks like we might lose a member of the outfit," said Sally, glancing at Butler and her father. "Dad wouldn't want a man who is afraid of wild horses working for him."

Madden knew that Butler lost his nerve at other times when it came to a showdown, but the new foreman didn't aim to say anything about that. He never had been one to run another man down.

"Yuh said yuh knew I was the man for the foreman's job," he said to Sally. "That yuh knew it all along. Why did yuh say that?"

"I think there will be a moon tonight," said Sally. "Ask me then." She smiled. "Maybe I'll tell you even if there isn't a moon!"

"Whoopee!" shouted Madden as he swung into saddle to go on about the day's work. "Be seein' yuh this evening, Sally. I'm moonstruck already!"

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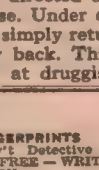

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 8)

Once, upon returning to camp after two days' absence trailing part of the herd that had gotten away during a storm and stampede, Goodnight, when miles from the camp, saw the camp fire burning, and as soon as he reached camp extinguished the fire, and again cautioned Loving about camp fires at night in Indian country. But it was too late. The Indians had also seen the fire and they attacked just before dawn, but due principally to the fact that Goodnight expected such an attack and was prepared to meet it, the Indians were driven off.

On his last trail drive, Loving was worried about government beef contracts and knew that the bidding for those contracts was due to take place at Fort Sumner before he and Goodnight could reach there with the herd they were on the trail with then.

While still two hundred and fifty miles from the fort, Loving wanted to go ahead and get there in time to bid on the contracts. Goodnight agreed for him to go on ahead, but cautioned him to ride only at night and to hide by day until after he had passed what was known as the Guadeloup points which was about a hundred miles, after which he would be out of the most dangerous part of the Indian country.

Indian Peril

Goodnight appointed W. J. "One-arm" Wilson to go with Loving, and for two nights they traveled and found secluded spots in which to sleep, rest and allow their horses to graze during the day.

On the third day Loving insisted that they travel by day as they could make better time and he was in a hurry to get to the fort, but on this, their first day of daylight travel, they ran into Indians at a point where a mountain jutted out near the river. The Indians gave chase and Loving and Wilson rode for the river and took up a position behind a little mound in the brush. This brush was only about four feet high but served as a concealment, the horses being turned loose.

The Indians, about a hundred strong, surrounded the brush strip with the exception of the side next to the river, and prepared to close in upon their victims. Two men against a hundred Indian warriors, and yet there was no thought of surrender. These two brave men felt that they were facing death, that they had no chance of living through the battle, but true to the code of the times they made up their minds to take as many as possible with them, to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

One by one the Indians were picked off as they showed themselves until quite a number of them had been killed and the others had become more wary, then Loving was shot through the wrist and side.

Wilson, at great risk to his own life, practically carried Loving to another position nearer the river in a sandy depression, laid him down in this foxhole-like position and prepared to defend him to the last. Luckily the Indians had not observed the change in positions, but Wilson knew that if their position became known to the Indians one rush

from the many warriors would be their finish.

The Indians used all sorts of ruses to find the exact location, and finally one Indian came crawling through the weeds on his stomach, parting the weeds with a long lance which he carried, and crawled directly toward where the men were concealed.

Just as Wilson made up his mind that he was going to have to shoot this Indian and thereby disclose his position to the others, the Indian aroused a big rattlesnake. The rattlesnake sounded his warning rattle, retreated a short distance, again coiled and rattled, and while the rattler had scared the Indian into turning back, his retreat had brought him dangerously close to the foxhole which made the situation none too pleasant for the wounded man and his comrade.

The Rattler Visits Them!

The Indians were unable to find the hiding place of the men before dark and then it seems they decided to wait until daylight again. In the meantime the rattlesnake apparently decided to share the foxhole with the two white men, as soon after dusk they heard the warning rattle just a few feet from them, but they kept perfectly quiet and nothing happened.

Loving's wounds had thrown him into a high fever. Wilson could not even risk discovery by the Indians to go a few steps down to the river to get water for the wounded man until about midnight, when the moon went down and it became dark, and in any movement in the dark he had to chance stepping upon the rattlesnake.

Loving, feeling sure that he was mortally wounded, begged Wilson to leave him and make his escape, so that he could tell Loving's folks what became of him, saying that he was sure he would not live till morning, and that if Wilson stayed he would be killed also. He finally persuaded Wilson to make the try.

Quietly this one-armed trail driver, carrying a rifle, eased himself into the river, and knowing that Indians were all about, proceeded to float down the river for quite a distance before swimming across. He nearly drowned trying to swim and carry the rifle at the same time, and finally cached the rifle and started out to back trail to the men bringing up the herd.

Imagine this one-armed man, barefooted, as he had discarded his boots when he entered the river, traveling three nights trailed by a pack of wolves too cowardly to attack a man upon his feet, but anything but pleasant companions, three days without anything to eat, standing all of this ordeal perhaps more to carry the news of his comrade's sad end to his folks, than to continue to live himself.

The Search for Loving

Wilson, worn out and footsore, finally reached the men who were coming up with the herd, told them the story, and Goodnight immediately started with fourteen men to the spot where Wilson had left the supposed dying man.

After riding for about twenty-four hours they came to the spot, found the gun that Wilson had cached but no Loving and so supposed that the Indians had killed Loving and

[*Turn page*]

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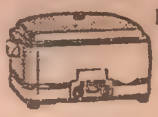

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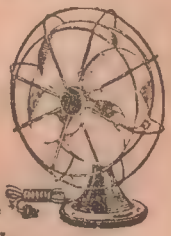

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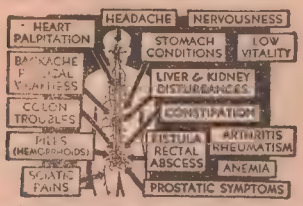

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had thrown his body into the river. Sadly they rode back to the herd, Goodnight and the other men believing that Loving was dead, and for two weeks they did not know different.

Picture a badly wounded man, with high fever, in a foxhole-like concealment, surrounded by hostile Indians, probably afraid to move for fear of encountering the rattlesnake that was or had been in the foxhole, and yet just to let his family know his fate, persuading his only companion to leave him to his fate and the mercy of the Indians. Such men are not easily done for, and so it was with Oliver Loving.

It seems that the water that Wilson brought him before his departure revived him to the extent that he began planning escape. He finally dragged himself down to the river's edge and into the water, floated down perhaps close to Indian sentries on the lookout, finally made the shore, crawled into the weeds and hid all the next day.

The next night he made his way to the road or cattle trail where it struck the river, and there for five days he laid in hiding, wounded and feverish, seven days in all without food, never surrendering himself to the fate that seemed to be staring him in the face, fighting to keep alive, always hoping that some friendly traveler would come along. Finally some Mexicans came by that way, and he hired them to take him to Fort Sumner, offering them two hundred and fifty dollars to take him to the fort in their wagon.

A Slow Trip

It was a slow tedious trip to the fort, a hundred and seventy-five miles, as the conveyance was a wagon drawn by oxen, but when about half way the party was met by several men on horseback, trail drivers returning to the Texas range. When they learned of Loving's condition they turned and raced back to the fort and sent an ambulance out after him, making the rest of the journey for the wounded man much more comfortable and speedier.

Had there been a capable surgeon at the fort even after all his hardships and suffering, Oliver Loving would have recovered from his wound.

The Last Roundup

Two weeks after the battle with the Indians the Goodnight party learned that Loving was in Fort Sumner and that he had escaped being killed by the Indians. Goodnight again left his herd and rushed to aid his partner. He arrived in Fort Sumner and found that the gunshot wound in the wrist was such that the arm should have been amputated, but the physician at the fort had been trying to save the arm.

Goodnight started a man to Santa Fe for a surgeon, but before he could get back, mortification set in and the local doctor was prevailed upon to amputate the arm, but it was then too late. Mortification had set in in the body, and a day later the man who had blazed the cattle trail westward, whose memory was to be honored by a great organization of pioneer cattlemen, had passed on to the last roundup, had taken the trail across the

horizon leaving behind him many fine tales of adventure.

In time to come, perhaps the name of the Old Time Trail Drivers' Association will be changed to The Sons Of Old Trail Drivers. It should be, for the organization should be passed on to the sons just as the old trail drivers passed on to their sons a great cattle country free of marauding Indians.

They were a great bunch of real he-men, men of a class that the country should be proud of and so we say long live the memory of the old time trail drivers. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY

OUR NEXT ISSUE

FOR years, ever since its discovery by the Spanish Fathers who crossed the great salt deserts, the mighty Colorado river has fascinated the minds and hearts of men.

Cutting its way through solid rock, it has hewed out for itself a chasm which in some places is 6,000 feet deep—well over a mile! Because of the great Colorado canyon and the thousands of branch canyons, exploration of the river was impossible. So in 1869 Major John Wesley Powell, Civil War hero, organized an expedition to sail the length of the Colorado in boats.

No one knew what lay in those dark and turbulent waters. Some old scouts prophesied quick destruction to the party. "Cataracts higher than Niagara," they warned. Certainly there were fierce and treacherous rapids which many men had seen, and flash floods and submerged rocks and always the wild current. But Powell was not frightened.

To insure supplies, he asked the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles to freight, by pack train, food and other needs overland and meet his party below the Mormon settlements in Utah, at the junction of the Paria and the Colorado.

So the adventure of the COLORADO RIVER GOLD began innocently enough for Captain Bob Pryor and his saddle-mate, Celestino. A simple packing job, or so it seemed. But the best laid plans—

First there was Smiley the Ape, a great fat bandit whose gang holed up in the badlands of the canyon country and who wanted the badlands to remain as remote and wild as they were. If Powell's expedition were a success, other people might follow and that would mean the law would come in.

Then there was Half-Face Brill, the scarred and murderous bandit who had a special reason for hating Major Powell and who headed as greedy and pestilent a crew as ever pulled trigger.

The Rio Kid ran into both bandits, but Brill gave him more trouble. Brill's gang captured him in fact and Pryor had the unpleasant fate of watching the bandits eat up the provisions he had packed in for Major Powell.

Brill's gang had also captured a group of gold miners who had been working a vein in the canyon. With them, unknown to Brill, was a U.S. Deputy Marshal, hunting Brill himself. The gold was a magnet to the bandit and he forced all his captives to continue work.

[*Turn page*]

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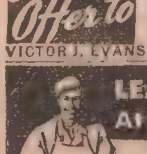

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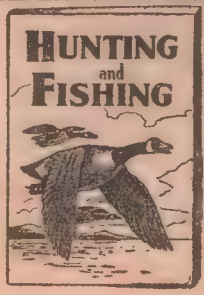

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—mining for him! The Rio Kid was no exception.

Meanwhile, the bandits waited for Powell's boats to come downstream. A guard was posted at the mouth of the creek which emptied into the Colorado to give warning. Their purpose was plain to the Rio Kid. They were laying an ambush for Powell!

He had to escape and warn the expedition. But how? He did it in characteristic Rio Kid fashion. That morning at the mine:

With his pick he uncovered a wide vein of yellowed rock; it had traces of gold in it but most of its color came from iron oxides straining the matrix. . . .

He climbed from the pit and sang out excitedly, "Look at this! Gold, gold! It's the mother lode—tons of it!"

The Rio Kid's cry sent a thrill through the heart of every man who heard his frantic voice. It galvanized even the captives. Overseers bunched in with them to see the big find. Harry Brill picked up his feet and hurried to join the throng. . . .

Everybody was crowding to see the find. The Rio Kid let himself be pushed to the edge; he moved quickly away. As he was about to swing past a high boulder on the way to the trail, Bull hurried around and bumped into him, recoiled scowling, his hands throwing up his shotgun.

"What's goin' on?" demanded the bandit.

"They've found the mother lode, Bull!"

Bull's eyes blinked; he moved past the Rio Kid, with a quick curse. Pryor hit him as hard as he could from behind, with the pick handle. Bull collapsed and the Rio Kid, seizing the shotgun and Bull's sixshooter, turned and ran full-tilt up the path.

There were two outlaws on guard where the horses were picketed, but Saber, the Rio Kid's horse, took care of one and the Kid's own shooting threw the other off. In a moment, Pryor was on Saber's bare back, thundering over the rocks.

Brill and his men, who took only a second to see through the ruse at the mine, were soon in hot pursuit. Bullets screeched after Pryor as he lifted Saber up the long winding trail to the top and the desert. He lost his pursuers there. And now he had only one more enemy to fight—the desert itself.

By the second day of his flight north to reach and warn Powell, Saber was suffering so badly from thirst that the Rio Kid sent him off to find water from the creek while he continued upstream on foot. He found at last the path downward which the Spanish Fathers had taken, but by the time he had slipped and staggered to the bottom he was nearly unconscious. So it was that Powell found him.

Now the Rio Kid had his own personal score to settle with Half-Face Brill—a score of kicks and blows and beatings while on short rations, working with a pick in the burning sun.

How he settles it makes up the rest of this colorful and dramatic novel of the opening of the great empire of the Colorado—Tom Curry's finest Rio Kid yarn, COLORADO RIVER GOLD. Reading it is the next best thing to exploring that wild and untouched country yourself.

You'll thrill to the clash of action, the bold sweep of canyon and desert, the stark courage of brave men fighting against harsh Nature and harsher men!

Featured with our Rio Kid novel is a short story, MEN WITH WOUNDS, by Johnston McCulley, world-famous author of THE MARK OF ZORRO and other Zorro stories.

MEN WITH WOUNDS tells the unusual story of a wounded outlaw who captured a wounded member of a posse and used him as a shield. The outlaw took the posseman's badge and pretended he was the lawman and the posseman was his prisoner. Then he forced the other to ride to town with him and fooled the local doctor into giving them both medical treatment for their wounds.

All the time young Clem Lawrence knew that as soon as the outlaw was in the clear and he no longer needed the youngster, he'd shoot. Or at the first suspicious sign he'd shoot. He had to do something fast if he expected to see another sunrise! You'll like this exciting, suspenseful story, as well as the other fine yarns and features in our next issue.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WE think that THE RIO KID WESTERN has about the best and most loyal bunch of readers of any magazine going. If you were here with me in this office and could look over the letters we get you'd understand why we say that. For example, look at this:

The Rio Kid is the best western character anybody could want to read. Not only is there plenty of entertainment in the way of action and shooting and stuff, but the way the author brings in real people teaches us some history of the old west and makes us understand it better and I say that's good. —*James Waverly Bell, Sioux City, Ia.*

That's what you call ringing the Bell—oops,

[*Turn page*]

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sorry, friend. Couldn't resist it. But you said a feedbag full. That's exactly what our aim is. Give you a fast, thrilling story and at the same time keep it authentic, put in some real live color of the West so you get a picture of what life was like out there in those days. And it plumb tickles us that our readers understand what we're doing without our having to call attention to it.

But I reckon there's no pleasing anyone. For here's an hombre who is peeved about the whole thing.

Where do you get off making men like Wyatt Earp or Mark Twain or Pat Garret stooges of the Rio Kid? Isn't that going a bit too far?—*Paul Carraway, Columbia, S. C.*

Stooges, *amigo*, is not exactly the word we would have chosen to describe the relationship between the Rio Kid and his friends. As you know, Bob Pryor is a fictional character. He is, however, the hero of those stories and he is quite a hunk of fighting man.

Roaming through the West as he did, he was bound to meet up with the famous real figures of the time, so we have just tried to show you what would happen when they met. It is after all the Rio Kid's story and he naturally plays a major part. The other characters come in and play a minor role in these stories. We are not belittling them in any way, we are just showing that they were there and shared some of the adventures of the period. Okay?

And finally:

I liked SIERRA GOLD fine, but I think the best RIO KID in a long time was LORD OF THE SILVER LODE. It seemed realer than the others somehow. I think a boom town in the West must have been just like that with greedy men and good men, tough ones and honest ones.—*Gloria Burgundy, Kingston, N. Y.*

And that winds us up for another issue, pards. Keep sending in your letters and postcards! Just address The Editor, THE RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. Thanks to everybody!

—THE EDITOR

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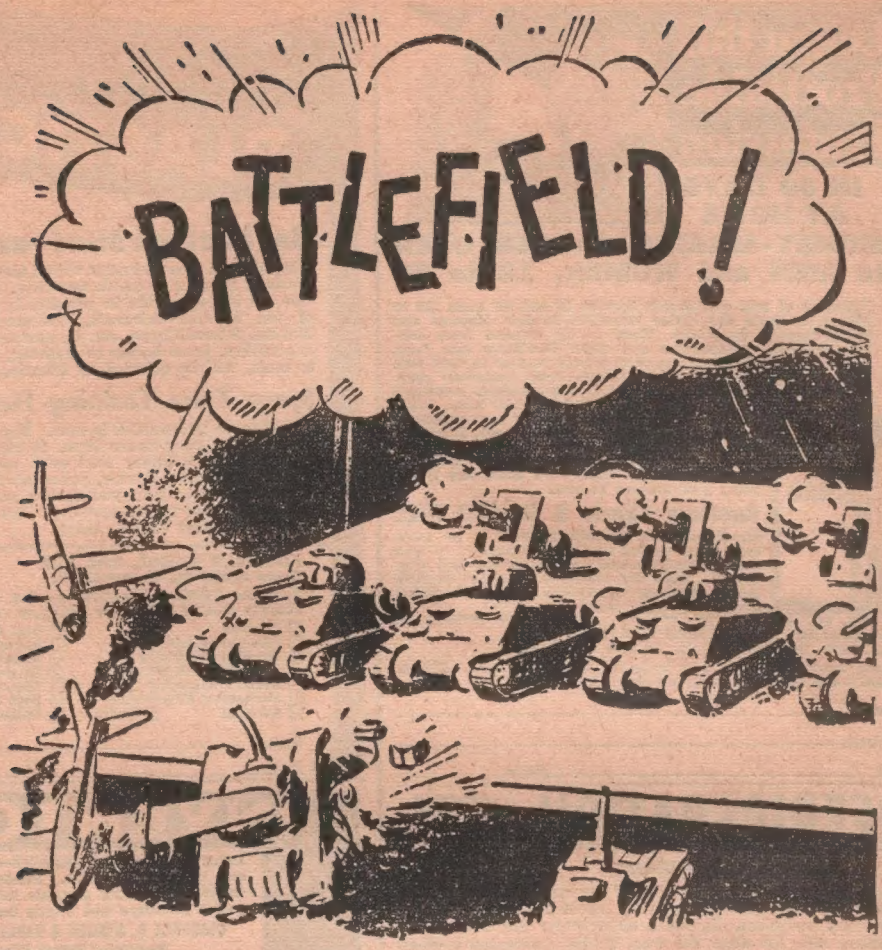

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